

It is easier to say nothing

The Repression of Dissent and the CPSA Board

by

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Prepared for the Annual Meetings of the CPSA,
University of Manitoba, June 4, 2004

It is easier to say nothing, at least, almost always. But there is a time in the life of a professional association of political science when it should take the risk and speak out. That time is when the values defended by the association are in jeopardy, when, for instance, one or more of its members are under attack for carrying on the activities associated with the profession. I have in mind such cases as the pursuit of Frank Underhill undertaken at the University of Toronto, or the firing of King Gordon by McGill or the Harry Crowe case that occurred here in Winnipeg. These were times when I would expect to see us go on the public record in defence of colleagues branded as unworthy because of their views. That these affairs arose at all was due, it must be said, not just to ignorance. It was the use of administrative power to structure debate so as to eliminate opposition, and render views illegitimate. Obviously, Universities are sites of political struggle, much like the societies they are a part of.

In this regard I was doubly surprised to note the resignation of a CPSA board member over the issue of charges laid against political science students in the wake of protests in Quebec City surrounding the negotiation of the FTAA. Political science students were facing court cases, expenses, time away from studies, and jail terms, for doing what many citizens had done before them, and many will have to do in the future, demonstrate their opposition to state policy. I wondered why I was not more aware of what had gone on, and why the CPSA board (despite its capable president) was unable to satisfy one of its members. Student dissent is one of the main forms of political action. Faculty may not always support the reasons for the activity, or may disagree with the actions being undertaken; few would argue with the proposition that such political protest is a part of a healthy democracy.

The exchange of letters on the polcan list serve prompted me to write to contest the view of the association put forward by the president. It is why I am here this morning, not just because I like Winnipeg, and feel at home under the prairie sky. My response to the issue of how a professional association of political

scientists should deal with the repression of dissent was to agree to come, and put forward my views, in the company of the principals, and others. When I am done doing that, I also want to make a recommendation which I think follows logically from my position, but does not require you agree with my ideas in order to support it. I think the CPSA should take on something new, a publication project, not unlike what has recently been produced by the APSA, and the American Economics Association, and I will explain why. But first my views.

Dissent and the Academy

We live in embarrassing times for academics. Being asked to join campaigns to develop brand names and product lines to attract clients was not what most of us had in mind when we decided to pursue a career of research and teaching, of discovery and dissemination of knowledge. The views being put around about what is a University are designed to raise money, and the public profile of institutions. Does this mean that activities that imperil fund raising efforts, and create controversy are going to be frowned upon and suppressed? I should hope not, but would suggest that some vigilance is required by tenured faculty to ensure that unpopular research pursuits be allowed to continue unimpeded by the public relations department. These would include work on intellectual property rights linking drug prices to deaths in Africa, or the constitutionalization of private property rights in Canada through NAFTA, the WTO, and other trade deals in the works.

The NYT recently featured a letter from a retiring Dean at the University of Chicago. He urged us all to do our jobs, and eschew political activity, stay aloof from political debate. Presumably he had in mind a job definition drawn up by him, or approved by his office. Perhaps he made an exception for political scientists when he remonstrated us to remain non-political. It is likely he never read Aristotle, who considered non participation in politics a problem, or perhaps his translation read that man was a "social animal."

No one likes to be criticized by authorities who judge our career performance. On the other hand, academic work is part of an ongoing project that goes well beyond the practices of who ever happens to hold an administrative position at a University at any one time. Normally, academics stand together against attempts to orient research and teaching to whatever purposes, by whosoever deems it their responsibility to decide for us what it is that we do. This is the first purpose of a professional association: to protect and advance academic freedom, most would agree.

My conception of this freedom was first put to me as an undergraduate at the University of Alberta, by a classmate who cited Stuart Mill. To paraphrase, I disagree with what you say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it. I adopted that view as my own, and believe it is widely shared within the academy. It is the basis of academic tenure, one should not be persecuted for holding what authorities deem to be dangerous (i.e. subversive of authority, unpopular or unfashionable) views.

Defining the limits of opinion, and that is all dissent really amounts to is an expression of opinion by speech and by action, is something that political

scientists include in their definition of a political society. A society is open when it admits a range of opinion. One can disagree with Karl Popper about who were the enemies of the open society, but all would agree that a society where a range of dissenting views is not admitted is not a democracy. Where it becomes a matter of disagreement with the state there are a range of options open to citizens. These would include speaking out, organizing opposition, peaceful protest, and political activism. Intellectuals can bring their skills to bear on matters of public policy, either as members of groups or as invited participants.

It is the nature of political science that it studies power. So the issue of whom decides what is not unfamiliar to us. Freedom of speech and enquiry are integral to political (or liberal) democracy. The limits are set by law, and enforced by the state. When the state decides to prosecute someone for their views they are defining what is legitimate, and illegitimate political expression. When we disagree with the state definition of "legitimate", it is easier to say nothing, almost always.

The special case is when the state brings its monopoly of legitimate force to bear on public issues. For those who dissent, the question is no longer one of normal opposition to state policies, the give and take of everyday politics. It is having opposition declared criminal activity by state authorities, and being forced to defend not simply a cause believed to just, but one's very guilt or innocence in a court of law.

The difference is fundamental between normal politics, and criminalization of dissent. Examples can be found of political rivals using the courts in an attempt to criminalize their opponents. Southam Press and the National Post pursued Jean Chretien over his golf course sale, while Republicans tried to impeach Clinton over his conduct with a White House intern. The Ontario government has done what it could transform OCAP leader John Clarke into a criminal. The RCMP and the Solicitor-General have done their best to entrap Jaggi Singh, and convict him of encouraging and committing violence.

In his intervention the CPSA President had reminded us: "The Association as such will not assume a position upon any question of public policy not directly related to the discipline of political science or commit its members to any position thereupon."

My concern was not with questions of public policy but what "affect[s] the values and standing of the discipline. Conformity of thought to norms set down by the state or any other body seems to me directly related to the discipline of political science. It is difficult to imagine free and independent intellectual enquiry under conditions where censorship or suppression of dissent exists."

In other words where the values of our association are in question is when the state uses its means of violence, the power of arrest and detention, to discipline political opponents. The cases of Clarke and Singh are among the most prominent recent examples. The CPSA is not expected to take positions on issues of public policy such as those raised by Clarke and Singh (because it can not purport to speak on behalf of its members on issues before the public). But, there is a difference between supporting a policy (say free trade, cuts to welfare,

or Quebec independence) and supporting independent enquiry, and the debate upon which it depends, regardless of the positions taken.

The CPSA should not fail to act on behalf of its members to promote the discipline of political science and the values of the academy to which we belong. I enumerated some areas where we should expect the CPSA to be vigilant in my letter. "Some examples would be seeing that political science graduates are eligible for government employment, ensuring that open research competitions are held for state grants, and that reporting of research findings by media is even handed."

I conclude that the CPSA should vigorously defend students being prosecuted for their political views by lending the standing and prestige of the association to the cause of free enquiry and debate. A press conference and an open letter to the prime minister would be an appropriate course of action.

Improving the Climate of Debate

Governments can resort to criminalization of dissent most easily when issues of public policy are not adequately presented in the public domain. This is not the place to note the failing of the Canadian media to play their role under the unwritten constitution as purveyors of independent, balanced, information and opinion. It is the place to recognize the limitations of *Canadian Public Policy* as a review dealing with political issues of public interest. Is it still sponsored by the CPSA? It features research findings that would be difficult for non-specialists to digest. Our own review the *CJPS* fills its role as a flagship vehicle for learned scientific work, and does produce work such as the article by the U of A scholars (Linda Trimble and Shannon Sampert) in the March 2004 issue that bears directly on debate in the current election.

I would propose that while the CPSA would not wish to take positions on issues of public interest, it should do more to promote debate and discussion of such issues by its members, as a way of asserting the values of the discipline. One way of improving the quality of debate would be through the creation of a professional scientific journal that is designed for an informed public. The short-coming of traditional scientific journals in this respect is well known. The ability of specialists to write for a lay audience is not entirely untested, but it is undervalued in the academy. This may explain why both the APSA and its economics cousin have decided to launch such vehicles, to add to the prestige of comment on matters of the common good. The CPSA could step up and do something similar. It would serve the purposes of the association and the academy to have peer-reviewed, scientific, examinations of political issues written to be read by an educated public. It would help keep the other estates on their toes. It might even increase the scope of more conventional research and enquiry. Thank you for your time.