



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

FREE SPEECH AT U OF T Upholding The Principles Of Free Speech

*Robert Birgeneau
President, University of Toronto*

The University of Toronto made a decision on Friday, Nov. 21 that is based on fundamental principles of free speech. The decision has prompted some controversy and I want to elaborate on the reasons behind our actions to ensure that the community understands the issues at hand.

A recognized student club, Al-Awda, requested the use of a room on campus to hold a public conference Nov. 22 and 23 titled the Toronto Palestinian Solidarity Conference. It came to the University's attention that, in order to attend the conference, all participants were required to agree to a Basis of Unity, as follows:

1. We support the Palestinian right of return. It is non-negotiable.
2. A two state solution is not a viable or acceptable option for the Palestinian people.
3. Israel is a racist apartheid state.
4. Our activism is imbued with an anti-colonial feminist practice.
5. We support the right of the Palestinian people to resist Israeli and colonialism (sic) by any means of their choosing.
6. Actions that we organize at this conference will be developed under the framework of respecting a diversity of tactics.

Requiring attendees to agree to the Basis of Unity excluded persons with dissenting views and was thus in violation of the University's Policy on Recognition of Student Groups, which, among other things, confirms that "the essential value of the University must remain that of preservation of freedom of enquiry and association." It is also important that all recognized campus groups adhere to the requirements of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

The University was prepared to continue the Al-Awda's booking of space if the group agreed to remove the requirement for participants to sign the Basis of Unity. The public conference could have proceeded if the group had been willing to allow freedom of expression, consistent with the University's Statement on Freedom of Speech. The

student group had indicated that the Basis of Unity was required in order to provide a safe environment for discussion. The University does not accept that open discussion of the issues would have created an unsafe environment and had offered assistance in providing security and in preventing disruption at the event. We did so with the expectation that all members of the University community, when pursuing freedom of expression, would do so in a manner that respects the rights of others.

Al-Awda declined to remove the requirement for participants to sign the Basis of Unity and effectively precluded the conference from taking place.

It is important that our community understand that the decision to deny this student group use of University facilities unless it permitted other views to be expressed was not, in any way, a decision that the group would not be allowed to express its views in accordance with University policies. The ability to examine and comment on issues of the day is central to the mission of the University.

As the university's Statement on Freedom of Speech indicates, "the essential purpose of the University is to engage in the pursuit of truth, the advancement of learning and the dissemination of knowledge. To achieve this purpose, all members of the University must have as a prerequisite freedom of speech and expression, which means the right to examine, question, investigate, speculate, and comment on any issue without reference to prescribed doctrine, as well as the right to criticize the University and society at large...The existence of an institution where unorthodox ideas, alternative modes of thinking and living, and radical prescriptions for social ills can be debated contributes immensely to social and political change and the advancement of human rights both inside and outside the University.

"Often this debate may generate controversy and disputes among members of the University and of the wider community. In such cases, the University's primary obligation is to protect the free speech of all involved. The University must allow the fullest range of debate. It should not limit that debate by preordaining conclusions, or punishing or inhibiting the reasonable exercise of free speech."

This and all universities are unique in society in guarding the principles of free expression that have been won over the centuries in the face of numerous attempts to thwart them. There is a far greater risk to our society when these tenets are denied or made subservient to doctrine and intolerance.

It is my hope that all members of the university community will work together in sustaining our tradition of tolerance, understanding and respect.

Statement by U of T President Birgeneau, November 24, 2003.