

Acadia professor defends Beyak's residential school remarks

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A picture of Senator Lynn Beyak accompanies other Senators official portraits on a display outside the Senate on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. (SEAN KILPATRICK / Staff)

An Acadia University professor is under fire for defending Sen. Lynn Beyak's controversial comments about residential schools.

Dr. Rick Mehta, a psychology professor and self-described free-speech advocate, says he was mobbed on social media after a Jan. 5 tweet to Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer in which Mehta criticized him for removing Beyak from the Conservative caucus over what many have called racist letters posted on her parliamentary website.

Rick Mehta

@RickRMehta

. @AndrewScheer You claim to support free speech, yet you remove Senator Beyak from your caucus. Where is the evidence of racism? Are you saying that the Aboriginal people should have a protected status and therefore can't be criticized? Bad move re: race relations.

8:27 AM - Jan 5, 2018

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56 people are talking about this

Responses ranged from calling him deplorable and telling him to resign to calling him a beacon for free speech.

Juno award-winning Inuk musician Tanya Tagaq even weighed in.

“Rick, I support free speech. You are under-representing the human race and I pity your students,” she wrote.

Speaking with The Chronicle Herald on Tuesday, Mehta said he believes looking at issues like the residential school system from only one side prohibits meaningful discourse.

He said he supports Beyak’s now-infamous statements that Canadians ought to hear the stories of the thousands of students who allegedly benefited from the system and had “positive experiences,” as well as the stories of the thousands of children who died or suffered in residential school care.

“To me, all that matters is the truth, that we look at all the stories and as much information as we can from that dark chapter,” he said.

“The problem is that the perspective is not even open to discussion, which worries me when you have a university or any kind of context in our society where issues are not up for debate.”

Mehta, who made a point of mentioning his East Indian heritage, also penned a letter to Scheer in which he expanded on his concerns regarding the party’s stance on Beyak and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In it, he says the commission has been run primarily by activists who have “sought and achieved a goal in which one segment of the population (Indigenous/Aboriginal) has a protected status and therefore can’t be criticized in any way.”

Rebecca Thomas, Mi’kmaq activist and Halifax’s poet laureate, said the problem with using the free speech argument to protest Beyak’s removal from caucus is that free speech does not mean free of consequences.

“Free speech fundamentally means you won’t be thrown in jail for what you say, you will not be persecuted by the state, you will not be stoned to death in a public square while police look on,” she said. “But if I walk out of my office right now and go on a racist tirade . . . and I lose my job, I should lose my job. I’m not going to get thrown in jail but I am going to face a consequence for my actions.”

Thomas, who is the daughter of a residential school survivor, said suggesting Indigenous peoples benefited in any way from residential schools is grossly insensitive and dangerous

“Indigenous people prevented and were a roadblock to colonization into the settlement and building of Canada into the nation as we know it now, and in order to get around problem they targeted tens of thousands of children,” she said.

“Yes, perhaps some kids ended up getting food or learned to read or whatever those minor positives (Beyak) may be trying to allude to, (but that) does not in any way shape or form create an equal and opposite argument that residential schools were in some way worth it.”

Moreover, she said, trauma that was created in the residential schools is still being felt in Indigenous communities today.

“What they took away from my father they also took away from me,” she said. “It’s not just people who sat in the classrooms, it’s the generations and the generations that have come after. I grew up with an alcoholic parent who wasn’t around until I was about 17 years old — just because I didn’t go to a residential school doesn’t mean I wasn’t affected by it tremendously.”

Scott Roberts, director of communications for Acadia, said Mehta’s views are not reflective of the institution.

However, as an institution that fiercely guards the principles of academic freedom and free speech, Roberts said it would not be appropriate to open up a debate on Mehta’s comments.

Acadia has a significant number of Indigenous students and Roberts said the school has worked diligently to strengthen supports not only for them but for the Indigenous communities in surrounding areas.

“With respect to decolonization on Acadia’s campus, we’ve had an advisory committee of the president working for some time developing recommendations and action plans to broaden the support that we have in place now,” he said.

“We’re working to build more connections to (Indigenous) communities and find ways in which we can meet the objectives of the TRC.”