

# Outspoken professor stokes free-speech debate at East Coast university

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An associate professor at Acadia University is facing a growing backlash over incendiary social media comments, stoking a national debate about free speech on campus amid calls for his ouster from the Wolfville, N.S., school.

Rick Mehta, a psychology professor and advocate of free speech, has commented publicly on a range of controversial issues from decolonization to multiculturalism, prompting both public outcry and support.

While his defenders say his voice is an antidote to political correctness run amok, his critics say his online comments attack marginalized people and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

The acrimonious debate has spurred a Halifax-based activist to launch a petition demanding his removal from the small-town Nova Scotia university, while a counter-petition is calling for him to stay in the classroom as a beacon of freedom of expression.

**READ MORE: [Sen. Lynn Beyak publishes 'outright racist' comments about Indigenous people on her Senate website](#)**

The controversy follows an uproar at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., last fall when a teaching assistant was disciplined for airing a debate clip featuring a controversial figure.

Lindsay Shepherd was reprimanded for failing to condemn the views of University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson, though it later came to light that no formal complaint was filed against her. Peterson, a psychology professor, refused to use gender-neutral pronouns to address students.

Although the cases of Peterson, Shepherd and now Mehta differ, they underscore a divisive debate about freedom of speech on university campuses in Canada.

“I fear that if I say something, I’ll be labelled as a racist,” Mehta said in an interview Monday, referring to the Indigenous residential school system in Canada. “If you dare question the orthodoxy, you’re automatically a racist and labelled a colonialist who somehow endorses what happen in the past.”

A spokesman for Acadia University said the school has not received a formal complaint against Mehta, although it is aware of his social media comments and the [petition against him](#).

At issue is his response to a decision by Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer to remove Sen. Lynn Beyak from his party’s parliamentary caucus.

Scheer booted the senator after she refused to remove offensive letters with racial undertones from her website, which were penned in support of her praise of residential schools.

In a tweet, Mehta called out Scheer for claiming to support free speech and yet removing Beyak from 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?” he tweeted earlier this month, adding that her ejection from the Tory caucus was a “bad move” for race relations.



**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](#)

Mehta clarified in an interview that he supported Beyak's right to speak her mind and post letters to her website, but that he does not agree with or endorse her views.

His position on Beyak's departure – and on topics including Indigenous issues and transgender rights – has galvanized both supporters and opponents.

Critics say his comments demean marginalized groups and are tantamount to hate speech.

“He attacks marginalized groups and perpetuates harmful stereotypes,” said Jessica Durling, a Halifax human rights activist who launched the petition to remove Mehta from Acadia.

“This isn't free speech,” she added. “This is hate speech. He's kicking down and attacking marginalized people and regurgitating stereotypes.”

For example, Durling points to his retweet of a post on Twitter that said it is “statistically impossible for all Native children to have had a negative experience with residential schools.”

He also retweeted a comment about the “Aboriginal industry agenda,” which “exploits western values of justice” and suggests Indigenous People “play the helpless victim” and “cash government cheques.” In retweeting the post, Mehta emphasized that this is the agenda of the so-called industry, which

claims to represent the needs of the entire Aboriginal community, and should not be interpreted as an attack on Aboriginal People.

**READ MORE: [Why didn't Conservatives give Senator Lynn Beyak the boot before now?](#)**

But Durling said university professors cannot propagate abhorrent comments and not expect consequences.

“Freedom of speech is not freedom of consequence,” she said.

“He’s being held on a pedestal as a university professor. You can’t just do whatever you want without consequence.”

Mehta’s defenders, however, say he’s a champion of free speech and civil liberties in a society obsessed with political correctness.

Encouraged by what they call his critical thinking, Mehta’s supporters have launched a counter-petition to keep him in the classroom.

The [online petition](#) said he is being “attacked by Marxist and Socialist forces that are trying to stifle debate and shut down free speech.”

Contrary to what his critics claim, the petition launched by Jay Andrew said Mehta “has expressed he is fully in support of trans rights as he is for all human rights.”

“He believes former residential school attendees that claim the schools did good in some cases should be heard as well, as part of the overall conversation,” the petition said. “He believes that there are people ‘self-identifying’ as Indigenous spokespeople that are exploiting the general public by not speaking openly regarding both sides of the above issues.”

The university should be proud to have Mehta on staff, the petition added, noting that “students will be better educated and better people for having taken a course of his.”

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