



The discipline of diversity

November 17, 2010

In the olden days, universities were viewed as places where students learned to think. In large part, they did so through listening to a range of opinions and determining for themselves how they felt about any given issue.

It appears that is, increasingly, no longer the case. It appears that, these days, if one disagrees with someone's opinion, one simply shuts them down, makes them go away. And in doing so, one robs others of the opportunity to hear that divergent view.

That is not a good thing. And it seems to be indicative of an increasing intolerance in our society.

Globe and Mail reporter Christie Blatchford is the most recent object of the "protest-and-shut-down" phenomenon. Earlier this week, about a dozen people protested an appearance by Blatchford at a Hamilton church. Fair enough. But last week, Blatchford's speaking gig at the University of Waterloo was cancelled by organizers after a handful of protesters occupied the stage. Some were chained together with bicycle locks.

The complaint from the protesters was that Blatchford's book about the native occupation of disputed land in Caledonia fails to explore land claim and treaty issues.

That could be because Blatchford's book isn't about land claim and treaty issues. It is about the very narrow issue of policing. Certainly Blatchford is not flogging the book as a treatise on Caledonia, nor is she submitting it as a doctoral thesis. It's just one book written by one reporter about one aspect of an ongoing situation. Nothing more, nothing less. And in drawing attention to the planned event, the protesters provided substantial free publicity for her book, *Helpless! Caledonia's Nightmare of Fear and Anarchy and How the Law Failed All of Us*.

Similarly, American right-wing commentator Ann Coulter got more publicity out of being cancelled at the University of Ottawa last March than she likely would've had she given a speech. Certainly, Coulter is known for her unambiguous, provocative, at times obnoxious conservatism. And certainly, those with opposing views must have the freedom to protest.

But protesting so fulsomely that an event is cancelled is not a victory for free speech. It is, instead, a worrisome sign of intolerance, particularly on our university campuses where divergence should be embraced, not rejected.

Public safety is the straw man for this type of censorship. But what is being lost in the melee is the discipline of diversity. It takes work to maintain respectful diversity. There is room for disagreement — that is a fundamental right in a free and democratic society. But exercising that freedom must not prevent others from exercising their freedom to listen to divergent views and make their own decisions.

Lee Prokaska

This article is for personal use only courtesy of TheSpec.com - a division of Metroland Media Group Ltd.