

Freedom of expression?

by Pierre Jasmin

The cancellation of speeches by former Israeli prime ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu at Concordia University and by U.S. ambassador Paul Celluci at the Université du Québec à Montréal due to security risks has provoked considerable indignation on the part of several editorial writers, over what they viewed as “the same dreary tale of mob rule and intimidation triumphing over reason and debate” (*The Gazette*, Nov. 18). In the following week, this perception took a decidedly anti-Quebec tone in a *Gazette* article entitled “Free speech held hostage in Quebec.” McGill professor Gil Troy joined in the Quebec bashing in the *Globe & Mail*, Dec. 6, writing: “Quebec campuses are becoming laboratories for lawlessness, terrifying proof of the dangers to succumbing to mob rule and the violence veto.”

Here, we are at the heart of the issue, in a way that Professor Troy perhaps did not foresee: it seems to me that irresponsible invitations from universities to representatives of governments at war risk giving those representatives a moral and intellectual clout that belies their military excesses (don't these count as “mob rule”?) which are rightly denounced by the United Nations and international organizations such as Amnesty International. What meaningful academic contribution can we expect from warrior-politicians who have abrogated the freedom of millions by resorting to military brutality – a heinous short-circuiting of thought and reflection, not to mention a failure of diplomacy? Organized protests against such invitations, if there's no threat of physical violence or defacement of property, is the only tool of influence left to young people: please, let's not deprive them of it! And as for the violence of the protesters, we saw worse in the '60s, when the role of the riot police was more one of repression than protection of the community: maybe our present-day governments, under an anti-terrorist pretext, are nostalgic of that period and this may explain why the demonstrations are turning uglier (at Concordia, for example).

Like Jacques Lévesque, UQAM's former dean of political science and law, I believe the invitation extended to Paul Celluci by my university was a mistake. Mr.

Celluci is the official spokesman of a government that has flouted international law and directly or indirectly caused the death of 100,000 people in Iraq over the past 18 months. Was the object of Mr. Cellucci's speech to make us forget the scandalous tortures and humiliations at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, or to act again as an apostle of the military-industrial complex, interfering in our internal politics to demand Canadian participation in the anti-missile shield program and a drastic increase in our military expenditures to the eventual expense of decreased education governmental funding (not to mention health and social security)?

As a pacifist, I lay myself open to the charge of moral naïveté, which is removed from the objectivity of political science. Let me however reply with the arguments of Jacques Pelletier, president of UQAM's faculty union, who said the role of the university's leaders is "to nurture the model and ideal of the university as a public service, a place of independent reflection and debate, dedicated by its mission to the progress and emancipation of all citizens, starting with the most disadvantaged members of our societies." The citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine precisely fit this definition because they never had the chance to speak for themselves.

Can't we all agree that debates nourish independent thinking in university students? This is why Montreal's Institut d'études internationales deserves our thanks for organizing respectful roundtables. Our deepest gratitude to the Norwegian university that gained world fame by having the courage to invite Israelis *and* Palestinians together; that debate was the origin of the extraordinary, though alas evanescent, peace between the two *intifadas*, a peace that was assassinated along with the deeply missed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

As Mr. Celluci would no doubt have felt qualms about a face-to-face encounter with democratic Afghan or Iraqi citizens, why couldn't we have invited MIT Professor Noam Chomsky to meet him in debate? But I bet that the heroic sacrificial victim of this ridiculous debate on freedom of expression (ridiculous because Mr. Celluci expresses himself in our chambers of commerce, on our radios and TV screens and in our newspapers, which devote many column inches to his lectures) would have politely declined – whereupon all the wonderful afore-mentioned "free" thinkers would have had fun denouncing the one-sided anti-American propaganda of our intolerant campuses.

Democratic debates should never include extreme right-wingers who believe in armies settling political matters in blood baths, nor extreme leftists who believe in armed and revengeful proletariat, nor religious zealots imposing their dogmas under death threats: freedom of expression should be limited to those who can speak *and* LISTEN. But as a musician, I might be biased on that note, too...

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