

Freedom to indoctrinate

by Elizabeth Hiscott

"The Keegstra case is useful in philosophy of education in providing a touchstone by reference to which philosophical generalizations can be tested..."

"There are ideas ... advanced by philosophers ... which come to grief once they are examined in the light of this sorry episode in Canadian education."

These were some of the comments made by Dalhousie University Professor of Education and Philosophy, William Hare, at a well-attended seminar on "The Keegstra Case in Canada," held last week in the Education Building.

These comments portray one of the reasons academics, educators, and other scholars, lawyers, people involved with civil liberties, and others, continue to be interested in the various aspects of the Keegstra case, five years after it became a major news story in Canada.

As Hare noted, this affair came to be seen as a paradigm (model) case of indoctrination (the accept-it-without-question process of teaching).

Hare began his presentation with background information on Jim Keegstra, the teacher of social studies and history in Eckville High School, Alberta, who taught his students that there is an international Jewish conspiracy to establish a world government. Keegstra used documents which no "reputable historian" would accept as authentic, to attempt to prove his theory, believing that those who did not accept it must be part of the conspiracy.

He taught that Zionists had invented the holocaust ... to attract supporters for their cause.... He made no attempt to deny

about Jews, in their essays.

Hare examined assumptions underlying the theories expressed by people involved in or relevant to the case, and focused on aspects of open mindedness, bias, neutrality, and tolerance, as he discussed the reasons for Keegstra's dismissal from teaching, which he said led to the dominant view that "justice was done." He noted that the case was seen by some as a test of freedom of speech; as an attempt to enforce censorship of Keegstra's views; and as discouragement of open inquiry.

Hare noted that Keegstra insisted he had tried to present alternative points of view, to make his students think; and that he had advised his students that the position he defended "was only a theory" and "one not widely accepted."

Though Hare said Keegstra's claim to have been following the curriculum showed "mistaken belief," he looked less tolerantly on the man's methodology, which he called dishonest; particularly in his use of sources which were supposed to help students to examine different points of view.

Hare noted that "in protecting his own view from criticism and in forcing a one-sided account on his students, Keegstra subverted the critical approach to teaching."

Referring to J. Anthony Blair's work and his distinction between arguments used to convince and those used to inquire, Hare pointed out that a teacher who uses argument to convince "must also teach the use of argument as a tool of inquiry" so students may "assess the teacher's position critically."

He noted the importance "how the argument is conducted to educational principles. It is because Keegstra's approach was a travesty of the Socratic ideal of following the argument where it leads, and not because he attempted to convince his students, that he stands condemned," Hare said.

On neutrality, Hare said what matters is the way one's convictions are held ... the central question being whether or not they are regarded as revisable in the light of new evidence or fresh argument. He pointed to the non-revisability of Keegstra's convictions as evidence of his not being a "champion of open-mindedness," as some of his supporters suggested.

Hare addressed the question of whether or not we should, in sincere commitment to free and open inquiry, tolerate ideas like the Jewish conspiracy theory for presentation in our schools, though it may be offensive or widely regarded as totally implausible.

He noted that there is a powerful tradition in philosophy of education which supports inclusion of controversial material, and open discussion of related issues. Though he doubts the Jewish conspiracy theory qualifies as a "controversial historical thesis," he still asked if it should be ignored in teaching. Would mentioning it give it support? Would excluding it lead some to suspect it had credibility? Might ignoring it until a student brought it up, mean it might never come up? These were the types of questions Hare raised.

Regarding "the traditional response to the dilemma ... to invoke the ideal that truth would emerge in open discussion," Hare pointed to the doubt cast by Frederick Schauer, who questioned the degree to which people really are rational.

As the central aim of education is to further development of students as rational agents, "the study of bad arguments is an important part of learning to argue effectively," Hare said.

Commenting on the "disturbing fact" that Keegstra "was widely hailed as a good teacher," he said the assessment was based

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on the fact Keegstra maintained discipline in class. The assessment was totally unrelated to any consideration of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes being learned by his students. Hare noted that this case might lead us to think out more carefully what a good teacher does.

In a question period Hare was asked why Keegstra taught history and social studies when he had concentrated on auto mechanics and industrial arts in his education. He responded that some people believe teachers have the ability to teach any subject. He added, "I think that is a misguided view."

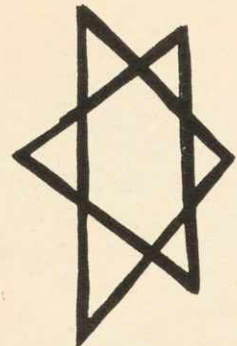
Dr. S. Sodhi, of the Dalhousie University School of Education, noted the Keegstra case action resulted from a strong lobby in Alberta. Sodhi questioned whether the use, beyond the 60s, of school texts containing derogatory terms, such as "savages" to describe native Canadian Indians, occurred because the Indians were not a strong lobby.

Hare answered that he believes there would have been similar action if another group had been talked about in similar terms. "There have been discussions by educators regarding that problem. A case like Keegstra's sensitizes more people to look critically at text books. This case was a dramatic and shocking example of prejudice at work."

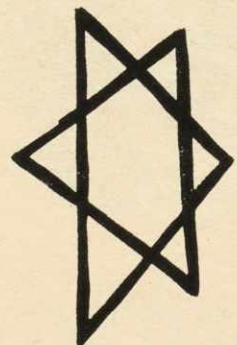
Answering a question on comparison of the Keegstra case with the Malcolm Ross case in New Brunswick. (Ross, also a teacher, published books espousing beliefs similar to Keegstra's.) Hare stressed that these cases raise different issues. "Ross subscribes to all of the beliefs Keegstra presented, but he doesn't teach them in the classroom."

Dr. A. Barton, of the Dalhousie University School of Education, asked, with a grin, about the appropriateness of "offering a cup of hemlock." To which Hare replied, "I think dismissal was adequate and right."

Socrates would likely have agreed with him.



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what he had been teaching, but sought rather to show that it was indeed the correct view ... a truth which must be communicated to others who have been duped."

Keegstra, who had been teaching at Eckville since 1968, was dismissed in January, 1983, for "failing to conform to the prescribed curriculum;" a decision upheld by a Board of Reference ruling in April 1983. His license to teach in Alberta was revoked in October 1983 and he was expelled from the Alberta Teachers' Association.

In July 1985 Keegstra was convicted of "willfully promoting hatred against the Jews;" a conviction which was overturned by the Alberta Court of Appeal, on the grounds that "the law in question violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

Hare discussed Keegstra's teaching which "displayed and fostered anti-semitic attitudes," including his encouraging students making "disparaging remarks"