

news

Confusion in terms?

by Arif Nizami

The link between political correctness and a new policy on discriminatory harassment has stirred up a lot of controversy lately. The Committee to Develop a Policy on Racism and Sexism at Dal have been met with criticism that their project evokes visions of thought police and censorship of expression.

The concept of political correctness is an over-simplified expression of what is at issue. The definition offered in the proposal includes: intimidation, either physical or psychological; personal slander on the basis of sex, colour, race, disability, age, socio-economic standing, religion, marital status or origin; and expression including written, speech, pictorial or symbolic that could reasonably be interpreted as derogatory that does not have a bona fide artistic or educational function.

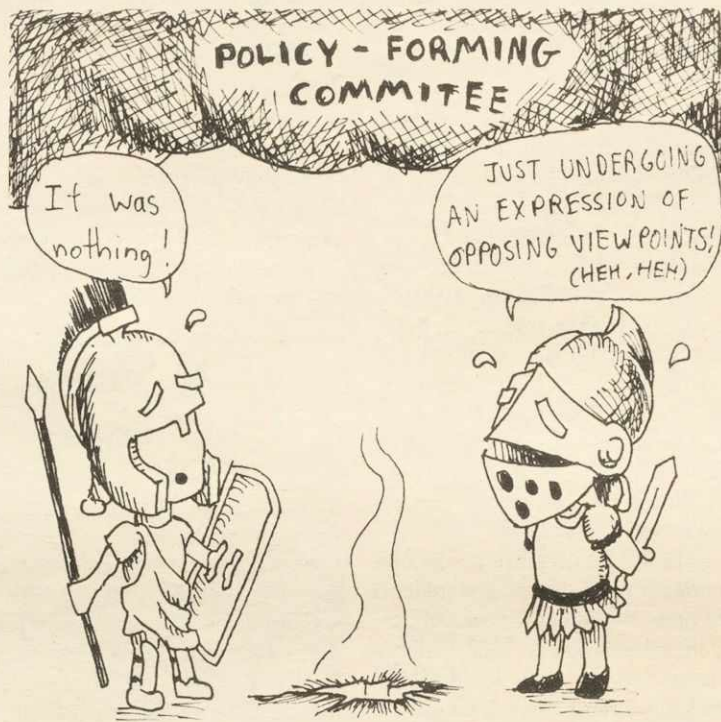
For the most part, this definition excludes classroom activity but assigns the task of deciding when the line between acceptable and unacceptable has been crossed. If the policy is passed, the Committee on Derogatory Harassment would consist of 12 members, each representing a different campus interest group, and one administrator, chosen by the President. There is also a provision to add members to the Committee to insure fair representation if the need should arise.

The policy aims to preserve courtesy and respect for all members of the university community and the freedom to express views in a responsible manner while respecting the rights of others thus creating an environment which is free from discrimination and harassment.

Its purpose is not to impose limitations on intellectual debate or free thought but to create a standard of conduct acceptable to everyone. Eric McKee, Chair of the Policy Developing Committee, relates how a banner flown at another university read "No means hit her again." This, according to McKee, is a clear example of negative connotation that is unacceptable and deserving of action.

In a recent forum on political correctness, Dr. Robert Martin argued that such a policy is simply making a "fuss" because on the whole, "university is the least homophobic, sexist and racist environment a student will ever encounter." "He went on to argue this approach is not going to alter the cause of these problems since it deals with the symptoms only in its punishing the few offenders.

It has also been argued that this is an insensitive approach and could be harmful because the implementation of the policy does not trust people to form their own views. The Policy Development Committee said this is not the case because the policy wants to insure that all views are able to be voiced freely and made so as not to offend. People will retain their rights



to be whomever they wish to be, so long as they do not hinder others from equally expressing their rights as well.

The Policy Development Committee maintains that the policy is not one of rigid enforcement but will be issue-specific because there are many university settings where "offensive" words and images are acceptable but others where they are not. The punishments will also be

issue-specific and will vary as necessary. One of the most pressing questions is who has the right to define what is sexist, racist or homophobic and that answer will have to come from the committee entrusted to do so.

The committee is working on the third draft of a policy on discriminatory harassment to be presented and possibly passed before the end of the year.

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