



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

December 14, 2010

The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario
Office of the Premier
Room 281
Main Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier McGuinty;

On behalf of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), I am writing to express concern over a recent event in the Ontario Legislature. Two opposition MPPs (Mr. Steve Clark and Mr. Peter Shurman), and a government Minister (The Honourable Eric Hoskins) strenuously denounced a University of Toronto Master's thesis, *The Victimhood of the Powerful: White Jews, Zionism and the Racism of Hegemonic Holocaust Education*, written by Ms. Jenny Peto.

I do not wish to comment on the content of this admittedly controversial work. Rather, I am worried that the reaction in the Legislature indicates a broader problem with how our elected representatives understand the intellectual work of our universities. It seems clear that Mr. Clark, Mr. Shurman and Minister Hoskins had not read the thesis in question when they made their comments. If the Legislature is going to discuss a piece of student research, they should at the very least be fully informed about its content.

There is a long history of politicians attacking research – based only on the title or second-hand understandings of its subject matter – for political gain. This damages the academic freedom of our institutions. Indeed, the ability to address controversial or unpopular issues without the fear of political reprisal is critical to the intellectual vitality of our universities and to a democratic society.

This is not to say MPPs and Ministers should not comment on research to which they object. However, these objections must be based on substantive understanding, not grandstanding. Our universities have robust structures in place to review the quality of submitted research. If academic freedom is allowed to operate free from political interference, it serves as a mechanism for encouraging informed debate and critique on a broad range of issues, including ones that may cause public discomfort. Inappropriate comments made in the Legislature undermine this process.

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I hope you will take this opportunity to inform your caucus on the meaning of academic freedom, and encourage your colleagues to consider research carefully before commenting on it in the Legislature.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Langer', written in a cursive style.

Prof. Mark Langer,
President, OCUFA

CC: The Honourable John Milloy, Minister of Training, Colleges & Universities