

Canada: Religious accommodation request sparks political furor

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A request from a lone student at Toronto's York University for an antidemocratic "religious accommodation"—the "right" to avoid interaction with female students—has metastasized into a full bore political fracas after a professor was reprimanded by the university administration for denying the request.

Representatives of Canada's political establishment have seized on the dispute to advance their respective right-wing agendas and hypocritically posture as defenders of democratic rights. Federal Conservative Justice Minister Peter MacKay sought to use the incident to justify the Canadian elite's imperialist foreign policy. In opposing the York administration's ruling that the student's anti-democratic request should have been "accommodated", MacKay asserted "this is what we've tried to combat in Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, Quebec's minister for democratic institutions, Bernard Drainville, has trumpeted the York dispute as proof of the validity and necessity of the Parti Quebecois provincial government's Bill 60. This anti-democratic legislation would, under threat of dismissal, deny 600,000 public sector workers the right to wear "conspicuous" religious symbols, including the Muslim hijab, Sikh turban and Jewish Kippah, and deprive fully-veiled Muslim women the right to public services, including health care, except in emergencies.

The York incident arose last September when a male student in an online sociology course requested that he be exempted from physically meeting with female classmates for a group project, claiming that his religion forbade him from doing so.

In mid-October, Martin Singer, the dean of Liberal Arts, the faculty overseeing the course, ordered the student's professor, John Paul Grayson, to accommodate the request. In this, he was buttressed by a similar determination from the university's Centre for Human Rights. In the dean's case, he reasoned that accommodating the student's religious beliefs would have "no 'substantial impact' on any other students' rights," especially if female students were "not made aware of the accommodation." Adding that other students in the course who lived outside the country were exempted from physical meetings, Dean Singer argued that the student should be afforded the same opportunity.

Incensed at this decision, Grayson convened a departmental committee to review the request, which it rejected as discrimination based on gender, before passing a resolution forbidding religious accommodations that contribute to the "marginalization of other students, faculty, or teaching assistants."

The student, whose identity and religion have not been disclosed, quietly accepted the committee's decision and carried out the group work as instructed. He even sent Grayson a letter thanking him for his handling of the request.

The case was seemingly closed. But after the York administration reaffirmed its original decision and chastised Grayson for not implementing it, opponents of the administration's ruling went public.

The elevation of the story to national prominence has been a source of great embarrassment to the administration of the publicly funded university. While defending the dean's decision, the school's top brass has been at pains to insist that it respects the equality rights enshrined in the Canadian Human Rights Act and has sought to focus attention on the "special" circumstances surrounding the case. In particular, it has emphasized that this was an online course and that other students, albeit for other reasons, were excused from the group work.

The York "accommodation" case does raise an important *democratic* issue. The student's "accommodation" request was not the assertion of a democratic right, but a plea for special privileges—for the "right" to discriminate against a large section of the population. Granting this "accommodation" opens the door to all manner of reactionary exclusionary-requests in the name of religious belief. Would the York administration now grant a request from a student invoking religion as the justification for his not wanting to sit beside or do group work with Black people or Muslims, Jews, or "low-caste" South Asians?

Students and everyone else must be accorded the "negative" right to practice their religion free from discrimination and state interference; but it is a violation of democratic principles to sanction any positive support for or sanction of religious beliefs, such as state funding for religious schools or special privileges in the determination of the curriculum or course requirements.

What is at issue in the York accommodation ruling is thus entirely different from Quebec's Bill 60. In outlawing religious head-coverings and other symbols, the Parti Quebecois government is attacking Quebecers' democratic right to practice their religion and whipping up chauvinism against minorities. The PQ's claim to be upholding secularism and striking a blow for women's rights is utterly hypocritical and cynical. Those threatened with the loss of their jobs are overwhelming Muslim women. Moreover, the legislation makes an exemption for "discreet" crucifixes and, in the name of protecting Quebec's

“heritage,” otherwise ensures that Roman Catholic symbols and iconography will continue to figure large in the public domain.

A number of proponents of multiculturalism, including, Raj Anand, the former head of Ontario’s Human Rights Commission, a smattering of “Muslim feminists,” and other academics have supported the York administration’s ruling. “Canadian law is very clear that freedom of religion protects sincerely held religious beliefs,” wrote a representative group in a *Toronto Star* op-ed column.

While most Canadians identify multiculturalism with opposition to racism and openness to immigrants and minorities, it is, in fact, a policy of the Canadian capitalist elite, enshrined in the constitution and other legislation. It is aimed at promoting allegiance to the Canadian state and reinforcing the Canadian nationalist ideology that the elite uses as a popular covering for its class rule and to harness the population to the pursuit of its predatory interests at home and abroad. Specifically, multiculturalism buttresses the ethnic and identity politics through which the ruling class cultivates petty-bourgeois layers among minorities and “new Canadians” and integrates them into the political establishment, so as to control and divide the working class. As the York ruling exemplifies, in the name of “multiculturalism,” various antidemocratic policies have been advocated and adopted.

The elite reaction to the York “accommodation” ruling, however has been largely, if not overwhelmingly, hostile. There has been a vast outpouring of adverse commentary in the corporate media and big business politicians have lined up to denounce the York administration. This furor involves a lot of democratic posturing by elite representatives who themselves have presided over brutal austerity measures and ever deepening social inequality, and who are complicit in, if not spearheading, attacks on Canadians’ democratic rights. It has also, as demonstrated by the aforementioned remarks of MacKay and Drainville, been the occasion for outright reactionary appeals by sections of the political elite and a spate of inflammatory media commentary, much of it laced with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bigotry.

Thomas Mulcair, head of the trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP), well illustrates the political establishment’s selective, politically-motivated “defence” of democratic rights. In 2012 when the then-Quebec Liberal government illegalized the Quebec student strike and placed sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate in the province over any issue, Mulcair and his NDP refused to oppose Bill 78, calling it a “provincial” issue. But Mulcair had no qualms about loudly proclaiming his opposition to a ruling— admittedly anti-democratic but at this point with a very circumscribed scope—issued by a single provincially-administered university.

Mulcair, and his NDP, it need be added, have aided and abetted the Harper Conservative government’s attempt to cover up the illegal spying being conducted by the Communications Security Establishment (CSEC), the Canadian partner of the US National Security Agency. Although it was revealed last June that CSEC has been systematically spying on Canadians’ electronic communications, the NDP said virtually nothing about the issue until last week when the public outcry over a document leaked by

NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden caused the Conservative government to baldly declare it has an unfettered right to collect and analyze the metadata of Canadians’ telephone, text, e-mail and internet use.

Typical of the anti-Muslim screeds published in the wake of the York ruling was a column by the *Toronto Star*’s Rosie DiManno. It depicted Islam as violent, derided the lack of women’s rights in the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East and Central Asia, and denied the existence of Islamophobia. Needless to say, DiManno’s column made no reference to the role of colonialism and imperialism, including Canadian imperialism in the Middle East, the Washington’s decades-long campaign to subvert secular nationalist regimes in the region, its alliance with the medieval Saudi monarchy, and its use of Islamic fundamentalist forces as proxy warriors in pursuing its mercenary interests from Afghanistan in the 1980s to Syria today.

In opposing the York ruling and similar anti-democratic policies pursued in the name of multiculturalism and religious accommodations, workers must beware the efforts of sections of the ruling elite to whip up anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment in order to divide the working class and channel its anger away from the real source of the growing attacks on jobs, wages and social programs, i.e., capitalism.

Grayson, for his part, has pronounced himself a supporter of Quebec’s Bill 60, including the anti-democratic ban on public sector workers wearing religious symbols.

The imbroglio over the York “accommodation” request demonstrates how multiculturalism and identity politics and anti-immigrant/anti-minority chauvinism complement and feed off one another. They are both anti-democratic and are employed by the ruling class to divert attention from the ever-widening class divide and set working people against each other.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle to unite the working class—across all linguistic, ethnic, and cultural divisions—in the struggle against the capitalist profit system and for social equality.



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