

Controversies: The Case of Frances Widdowson

BY ROBIN COLLINS

In the current climate of reconciliation with Indigenous populations, and given allegations about residential schools, mass graves and genocide, it is no easy task arguing to “incorporate isolated and marginalized tribal cultures into a modern economy and society”. One person who has tried to make the case for integration rather than ethnic separatism and for fact-based history and analysis is Frances Widdowson, a recently exiled associate professor within the Department of Economics, Justice and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University (MRU). She has studied indigenization initiatives for 20 years. Now she is appealing her dismissal.

Widdowson’s story has started to emerge in the mainstream media, although not always in a favourable light. Some of the more supportive commentary appears in conservative media and from conservative voices, such as the *National Post* and *Western Standard* newspapers, *C2C Journal*, and *The Dorchester Review* and from the pens of people like Barbara Kay, Tom Flanagan and (pro-colonialism political scientist) Bruce Gilley. One might be tempted to think Widdowson is a regressive thinker playing to a reactionary audience. She’s not.

Yet, since 2020, over 6,000 people signed a Change.org petition to fire her. It claimed “Frances Widdowson is a racist professor who works at Mount Royal University. This is a call to demand that the university condemns Widdowson’s hateful actions against the [Black, Indigenous, People

of Colour] community and that she is terminated for her racist remarks.”

Mount Royal University says their institution “unequivocally supports academic debate.” However, they also believe “academic freedom does not justify harassment or discrimination”, and that is apparently why they think their decision to remove Widdowson will stick.

Has Frances Widdowson become intolerable because she is critical of mainstream viewpoints?

Her views about indigenization have been unpopular in certain academic and activist circles at least since her 2008 book, *Disrobing the*

Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation (co-written with Albert Howard). However, she was hired by Mount Royal that same year, obviously with their knowing the no-holds barred historical materialist approach she takes in her work. She has also been critical of Black Lives Matter overreach and identitarian (and “woke”) politics that have escalated since the George Floyd killing in May 2020.

But ignominy really rocketed when she defended CBC journalist Wendy Mesley who was under attack for referring by name to the title of Pierre Vallières’ famous book about the radi-



Indigenous students at Qu'Appelle Industrial School, Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan

cal Quebec liberation movement, *White Niggers of America* (1971 in English), during a CBC editorial discussion. Widdowson argued it was ridiculous and juvenile that someone couldn't refer to a book title when there was no racist intent. The excesses of the culture of safetyism in this instance also mirrored what she was observing more frequently within universities.

Widdowson has been similarly fearless in questioning the notion that residential schools were uniquely brutal places run by sadistic priests. Some no doubt were, but not all, as is also the experience of people like Cree playwright Tomson Highway, former Dene Chief Cece Hodgson-McCauley, Senator Len Marchand and Chief Clarence Jules (who was chief of the Kamloops band and attended the Kamloops Indian Residential School.) Marchand has written: "The reader might be expecting me to tell a few horror stories about physical and sexual abuse at the residential school. But I know of no incidences at KIRS."

Frances Widdowson's own article probing alleged "unmarked graves" at Kamloops, "Billy Remembers", appeared in 2022. The national public mourning that followed claims of 215 buried children included Prime Minister Trudeau on bended knee, flag lowering and cancellation of Canada Day celebrations. These quasi-religious rituals have all the attributes of a national "moral panic", she argued.

Some would find this assessment heartless at best, and perhaps needlessly provocative. But her argument is carefully laid out: The more lurid stories at Kamloops are attributed to a defrocked United Church minister, Kevin Annett, including the one about "Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip [taking] a group of students from the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) on a picnic and

then abduct[ing] them." Another tale proposes that children were awakened in the dead of night to bury fellow deceased students in an apple orchard.

Widdowson asks whether we are witnessing a repeat of the satanic cult stories of the 1980s in which false memories played a contributing role. What else explains the race towards conclusions in the absence of forensic policing, exhumations, or solid evidence beyond ground penetrating radar "disturbances"? Widdowson points out another problem: If there are remains to be found, detection is now complicated by bodies not wrapped when buried. "It also is irresponsible not to point out that burials, even if they are probable, do not necessarily involve human remains."

COMPARISON TO NAZIS

Widdowson and others, within a research group of historians and academics who insist on exhumations and solid forensic evidence, have also challenged the inappropriate comparison of the Kamloops alleged burials with deliberate killings during the Nazi Holocaust. The "cultural genocide" narrative that sprang from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report in 2015 transformed what Widdowson sees as an "inevitable integration process" into a crime against humanity. Real abuse did take place, but the experiences of students were not universally bleak.

She sees a less than credible politicized process primarily benefiting "a tiny elite of indigenous and non-indigenous rent-seekers to the detriment of ordinary indigenous people." In her view,

"Much indigenous deprivation—low educational levels, poor health, and high rates of violent criminality, alcoholism, sexual abuse, and suicide—is due to being economically isolated and receiving substandard services, especially a poor-quality education. None of this will be rectified

by spending billions of dollars on the allegations about 'unmarked graves.'"

There is little question that early on Indigenous children died at up to five times the rate of non-Indigenous children. The causes of death are also well known (mostly tuberculosis, but exacerbated by underfunded residential schools, and dietary, sanitation and ventilation issues.) The numbers dramatically declined when new vaccines and other medicines were developed in the 1950s, such that indigenous student deaths were similar to death rates of the general student population. Another problem, less spoken about, was evidence of neglect at home on reserves. The TRC Report Executive Summary states: "By 1960, the federal government estimated that 50 percent of the children in residential schools were there for child-welfare reasons."

If the goal is truth-seeking, Widdowson believes the methods of investigative journalism and academic scrutiny will suffice, where claims are fact-checked and opposing views are weighed.

For example, many "missing" children have recently turned up, together with causes of death, after researchers laboriously scanned church and community archives.

However, the "mass graves" (now more often "unmarked graves") accusation fits well with the pervasive view that residential schools not only caused a cultural genocide but also a murderous physical genocide against Indigenous peoples.

Last year a group of more than fifty Canadian historians and academics, including Frances Widdowson, Margaret Macmillan, David Bercuson and Jack Granatstein, took to task the Canadian Historical Association's 2021 "Canada Day Statement." They were unconvinced that there existed—or should exist—a broad consensus among historians that Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples amounts to genocide. They wrote in

part that the CHA's Council is acting like:

"an activist organization and not as a professional body of scholars. This turn is unacceptable to us. The [genocide] issue represents a lively debate amongst scholars, many of whom differ in their assessments of this question."

TWELVE CHARGES AGAINST WIDDOWSON

Mount Royal's President and Vice-Chancellor, Tim Rahilly, listed twelve reasons for Widdowson's dismissal in a termination letter: Alleged conduct harming the reputation of MRU (#9); not taking criticism seriously enough (#3, 5, 10, 11, 12); "an abundance of complaints" about her use of social media (#1, 2), and an unacceptable financial cost of investigating complaints "by you or about you" (#6); all of which have contributed to a "toxic workplace environment" (#7,8).

In the instance where she is accused of disrupting an online Arts Faculty Council meeting by use of "harassing" language, (#4), Widdowson points out that she had asked a question about whether indigenous scholars were made uncomfortable when others argued that "indigenous science" wasn't credible science. The speaker claimed her query was laughable and insulting. The disruption occurred when several colleagues mobbed her for posting "laughable?", "insulting?" back in the chat. (Examples of the disputed pseudoscience include indigenous pre-telescopic "star knowledge", folklore that birds call on trees to bud in the spring, and the idea that plants actually "talk" to one another.)

Much of Mount Royal's case appears to have drifted from Widdowson's straight-shooting and unpopular ideas, towards her decision to use an (off-campus) satirical twitter account to mock the "woke" crowd that was anonymously hunting her down and calling her names. The imposter

pseudonym she created regurgitates the identical hyperbole that her accusers deployed against her, but to satirical effect. While MRU's collective agreement with faculty has no authority to monitor personal social media, the administration insisted that she cease referring to "members of the MRU community" in her tweets. Six of her colleagues, it turned out, were themselves proved to be among the "harassers" she was responding to, through parody.

The trend toward reified post- modernism

Widdowson believes, and the evidence is strong, the dispute isn't really about her rudely pushing back against the twitter mob. It is about her analytical takedown of what she sees as a badly-conceived and growing totalitarian movement, hiding under a superficial "leftist" ideology.

Widdowson's commitment to a scientific approach to scholarship is proving to be problematic for activists who endorse "indigenous ways of knowing", and for those community elders who insist that myths and storytelling should not be independently scrutinized and verified but must only be valued and celebrated.

A difficult but necessary distinction can be made between legitimate oral history and outright fantasy or creation stories. However, Widdowson's view is that "[U]ntrue ideas will become more and more prevalent, especially in those disciplines that are deeply involved in the study of the past – archaeology, anthropology and history." She also questions whether these "ways" are uniformly pacifist, cooperative, anti-capitalist, pro-feminist, and environmentally sensitive, as many progressives argue. She detects instead an essentialist (and racist) drift

to ethno-racial methodology".

Widdowson sees the academic makeover as legitimising a growing dependency of indigenous peoples and their leadership on the external state and its institutions, an arrangement that leads to a kind of permanent and unhealthy protection racket, and a subsidized settler-settled economy. Widdowson calls this neotribal rentierism, a focus of her academic work, where needs and historical injuries are never satiated, and where the so-called neo-colonial state is politically beholden to compensatory demands that never end.

Within this framework, "advocates for the Indigenization of academic disciplines are able to shield themselves from critique, depriving them from being able to challenge and transform their perspectives." She has been on panels where she offers her own historical materialist angle on a variety of "identity politics" subjects, including indigenous marginalization but also BLM activism and trans activism. This reaching out has not made her popular to many within what gets called the Left.

While the lynching has come from both activist students and activist faculty and their anonymous allies, with support from the administration at Mount Royal, Widdowson is also concerned that her reinstatement case could be compromised because the MRU faculty association (MRFA) may itself be captured. "While, up until 2018, the MRFA was trusted to fairly represent its members, the organization has now been almost completely taken over by an ideological faction. This faction now controls the MRFA Executive as a vehicle for activism and uses it to suppress dissent amongst the membership."

WHAT IF SHE'S RIGHT?

The extensive evidence she has documented for her defence suggests that despite her loss of tenure and sub-

sequent firing and all the political forces aligned against her, Widdowson should win her case on technical and free expression grounds alone. She is no racist, but nor has she patience for the fuelling of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. Her support for universal values and her critique of pseudoscience put her at odds with those who see this, not as scholarship, but as peddling neo-colonialism. This confusion, she argues, “is made possible because of the [wrongheaded] conflation of capitalist forms of exploitation with the development of knowledge.”

She recently began an online funding campaign for her legal defence which has quickly rounded up over \$20,000. Another piece of good news is that the national Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) has recently agreed to finance independent legal advice for her case. The Frances Widdowson situation has all the hallmarks of the kind of adventure academics and progressives once went to bat for: In defence of free speech, tenure, academic freedom, the pursuit of truth, and debate over unpopular but credible ideas that threaten the mainstream discourse.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Widdowson is a published academic (in University of Ottawa and McGill-Queen’s presses) with a serious and interesting academically-sound analytical framework. A good sample of her historical materialist approach can be found in her essay “The Political Economy of Truth and Reconciliation.” For many reasons – even if you strongly disagree with her views – she must not lose her battle at Mount Royal. ■

Robin Collins writes about peace and disarmament issues from Ottawa. He was a participant on Frances Widdowson’s inaugural Rational Space Disputations podcast in February 2022 (available [here](#).) –

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• **Episode 427 No Future for Nuclear.** Paul Dorfman has worked for UK, Ireland, and France as an adviser on nuclear energy, and he assures us that it is no solution to our climate change problems. It is too expensive, too slow to build, and too dangerous for too long a time. It will be vastly quicker and cheaper to develop wind and solar. Yes, the

intermittency is a problem and we may have to adjust our behavior to live within its constraints for a time, but there is no real alternative. And that transition is occurring, and quicker than most people realize. He notes that the International Energy Agency report that by 2026 the world will have built enough wind and solar power to almost equal the amount now being produced by fossil fuels and nuclear combined. For the video, audio podcast, transcript, and comments:

<https://tosavetheworld.ca/episode-427-no-future-for-nuclear>. After watching, scroll down and add your thoughts to the comment column.

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• **Episode 428 Our Future.** Paul Werbos is a “founding father” of artificial intelligence. His friend Jerome Glenn is head of the Millennium Project, an organization devoted to studying future global crises. Glenn describes the plans of UN Secretary General Guterres to revise the UN and make it oriented toward futurology. Guterres would like to transform the Trusteeship Council into a body representing multilateral stakeholders, which might include nations, business corporations, and unions, among other global entities. Werbos is more concerned about the possibility of a collapsed internet, for crucial information is not getting to the decision-makers who need it. For the video, audio podcast, transcript, and comments:

<https://tosavetheworld.ca/episode-428-our-future>, scroll down and share your own thoughts about these issues.

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• **Episode 429 Peacemakers During a War** Mary Ellen Francoeur is a Sister of Service who works against war. Neil Arya is a physician who has chaired the peace organization International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War Canada. He also maintains a clinic for refugees in Canada. They are both appalled at