

HILTON O'BRIEN: Free Speech and the Classroom

Alberta's Bill 25 mandates neutrality in the classroom: its critics demand supremacy.

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The critics have it exactly backwards.

Bill 25, introduced this week by Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides, requires teachers to present classroom material in a balanced, neutral way. It limits flags in schools to those of Canada and Alberta. It bars school boards from issuing statements on political or ideological matters unrelated to education.

The [Alberta Teachers' Association](#) called it a "grab-bag." The [Canadian Civil Liberties Association](#) called it censorship. A [University of Alberta professor](#) called it "authoritarian." The common thread is a claim that requiring neutrality in classrooms will have a "[chilling effect](#)" on free speech, and that removing Pride flags will make vulnerable students reluctant to seek help from their teachers.

These are serious-sounding objections. They are also philosophically illiterate.

In 1784, Immanuel Kant wrote "[What is Enlightenment?](#)" It is the foundational essay on freedom of expression, and it says almost exactly the opposite of what the critics assume.

Kant draws a sharp distinction between two uses of reason. When you are hired to do a job,

especially a communications job, you are obliged to say what the authority that hired you wants you to say. Kant calls this "private" reason, and his example is pointed: a preacher in a denominational church who disagrees with part of the theology he preaches from the pulpit must nonetheless faithfully present the denomination's teaching. To do otherwise would be to abuse the trust placed in him by his position.

The "public" use of reason is a different matter entirely. The same preacher can publish an article challenging the theology in a professional journal. A government minister can make a public case in the newspapers for a change in policy. This, Kant insists, must be sacrosanct.

Apply this to Alberta's classrooms. A teacher who uses the classroom to advance a personal ideology is exercising private reason against the authority that employs them. A teacher who writes in the papers, speaks on a podcast, or argues at a school board meeting is exercising public reason. Bill 25 restricts the first. It says nothing about the second.

Indeed, this government has gone further than saying nothing. Last fall, it introduced the Regulated Professions Neutrality Act, which specifically protects professionals from being sanctioned by their

licensing bodies for [what they say off the job](#). The government is simultaneously restricting ideological advocacy in classrooms and strengthening protections for genuine public speech. That is not a coincidence. It is a coherent philosophy of free expression, and it happens to be Kant's.

Now consider the flags.

The critics treat the removal of Pride flags as an attack on expression. But a flag hanging in a public institution is not an expression of the individual who put it there. It is a statement by the institution itself. It announces that the governing authority endorses a particular viewpoint, and that those who disagree should expect to find themselves in unfriendly territory. Whether the flag is a Pride flag or a Palestinian flag or a "Back the Blue" banner, the message is the same: this is what we believe here. Dissent at your own risk.

That is not free speech. That is its opposite.

This becomes particularly obvious in a Catholic school. The theology of the Catholic Church holds substantive positions on questions of sex, gender, and the human body that are directly incompatible with the ideology a Pride flag represents. In a Catholic context, such a flag does not merely express a viewpoint. It functions

as an icon, a visual assertion of a counter-theology displayed in a place of religious instruction. The classical formulation is *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer is the law of belief. What you display, you teach. What you teach, you profess to believe. A Pride flag in a Catholic school is not neutrality. It is the establishment of a competing religion on someone else's property..

Then there is the question of competence. Critics worry that students struggling with gender identity will lose access to a sympathetic teacher. But a sympathetic teacher is not a qualified therapist. Gender dysphoria is a clinical matter to be directed by licensed mental health professionals, and every reputable clinical framework urges extreme caution. A teacher who holds herself out as a source of "affirming care" is not helping a child. She (or he) is practicing psychotherapy without a license.

Bill 25 does not prevent teachers from caring about students. It prevents them from substituting personal ideology for professional responsibility. It does not silence anyone. It tells teachers to do their job on the clock and exercise their genuine freedoms off it.

The critics demand that classrooms be spaces of ideological compliance dressed up as inclusion. The government demands neutrality in the classroom, and truly protects free speech for teachers where it belongs: in the public square.

Kant would recognize the distinction immediately. It is a pity that the critics cannot.

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