

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

New Brunswick faculty add their voices to nation-wide outcry against political interference in university research

FREDERICTON and SAINT JOHN, NEW BRUNSWICK (June 18/09) - The Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers (AUNBT), the union that represents a thousand full-time and contract academic staff and librarians at the University of New Brunswick, is adding its voice to the groundswell of disapproval which has greeted Federal Science Minister Gary Goodyear's unprecedented interference in academic matters. By attempting to intervene in a funding decision of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Minister disregarded the principles of academic freedom and university autonomy, principles that are central to maintaining a pre-eminent post-secondary system with any international credibility.

Minister Goodyear asked the SSHRC to reconsider their funding of a conference jointly sponsored by York and Queen's universities. Happily, the funding remains in place and the conference goes ahead next week.

AUNBT was also disappointed to learn that Dr. Chad Gaffield, President of the SSHRC, bowed to ministerial pressure and violated the SSHRC's own policy when he requested from the organizers a list of any programme changes.

"The political situation in the Middle-East, the focus of the conference, is a subject guaranteed to invite controversy, but that is all the more reason to study it," said David Bell, president of AUNBT and professor of law. "Universities exist, in large part, to provide venues for detailed discussion of complicated issues. No university should be subject to political pressure when it seeks to exercise one of its central tasks: to further knowledge and understanding. The conference was awarded funding after undergoing a peer-review process, and that should have been the end of it."

AUNBT sees this most recent incident as a symptom of a wider trend of government and corporate jockeying for more control in the post-secondary sector.

"Research cannot be subject to transitory political or economic whims. Academic freedom is our bedrock principle. Without it, universities would be reduced to reinventing themselves after each election or with each shift in the economy."

"This is certainly a lesson that we have learnt here in New Brunswick," Bell added, referring to ongoing upheavals in the provincial post-secondary sector.

"We would hope that the Minister has learnt a valuable lesson about the value of academic freedom," Bell continued. "And we trust that Dr. Gaffield has taken the opportunity to reacquaint himself with the purpose of government-sponsored funding councils: to support research for its role in the expansion and exchange of knowledge, pure and simple. I certainly have no answers on the Middle-East question and AUNBT takes no position on the theme of the conference," Professor Bell concluded. "But if we can't even ask the questions, where does that leave us?"

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For further information, contact:
David Bell, President, AUNBT
(506) 453-4661
Email: dbell@unb.ca

