

# see to see —

## Airs: Alexander Cloutier's opening remarks

Robin Simpson

*Here in Québec, academic freedom is again the issue of the day. Words have been ruled too sensitive to be pronounced, regardless of the intention and context of their use. Books, frequently classics, have been pulled from syllabi by teachers out of fear of offending certain sensibilities. Lecturers have been disinvited under pressure by groups who disapprove of their opinions. Certain professors and their expertise have been contested under the pretext that they do not bear the right “identity.” Legal pursuits have even been taken up in order to have access to data from academic research. Putting into question academic freedom, these recent cases have been extensively*

*covered in the media. It is in this context that our commission, composed of five commissioners, was created by the government of Québec.<sup>1</sup>*

The above is my translation of Alexander Cloutier's opening remarks to the first of five days of public hearings for the Independent Scientific and Technical Commission on the Recognition of Academic Freedom within Universities [Commission scientifique et technique indépendante sur la reconnaissance de la liberté académique dans le milieu universitaire]. As president, Cloutier is joined by fellow commissioners Yves Gingras, Josée Maurais, Aline Niyubahwe, and Chantal Pouliot—all staff or professors at universities in Québec, with the exception of Maurais, a doctoral student.

The public hearings took place in Québec City at the end of August and

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<sup>1</sup>Alexandre Cloutier, “Déclaration d’ouverture: Audiences publiques,” (Commission scientifique et technique indépendante sur la reconnaissance de la liberté académique dans le milieu universitaire, 2021): 2.

beginning of September 2021. These were preceded by a questionnaire circulated to university teachers, a web panel with students, and an open call for statements from the public and members of the university milieu. The commission's investigation was guided by four questions: 1) The significance and definition of "academic freedom"; 2) the responsibilities of university students, faculty, and staff towards it; 3) the adequacy of the measures in place for the protection of academic freedom, 4) and the role of the state in these considerations. It is around this final question that the commission formed its mandate to advise on the provincial government's position and potential authority on academic freedom.

The commission was spurred by an event that took place not in Québec but at the University of Ottawa in Ontario. In the fall of 2020, part-time Professor Verushka Lieutenant-Duval used the N-word during a lesson in French on the resignification of derogatory slurs, following which a complaint was brought by a student to the dean of Fine Arts. Professor Lieutenant-Duval was suspended, setting off a string of petitions and counter-petitions, and drawing significant media coverage and debate in Québec. The sum of these

events was referred to as the "University of Ottawa affair" in a winter 2020 report submitted to the Ministry of Education in Québec, which recommended the formation of what would become the Cloutier commission.<sup>2</sup> The commission's activities were to be summarized in a final report submitted before the end of 2021. In addition to their recommendations, the commissioners were expected to provide an account of the "recent situations" that have brought this question to the fore of Québec society. In consideration of the "affair" and its drift between Ontario and Québec, it should be noted that the surrounding "situations" are taking place in French—French as a particular site, a political field, or, perhaps more accurately defined in this instance, a state.

In response to the editors' invitation for a word on the current climate in Québec, I thought of this commission and the atmosphere Cloutier constructs in his opening remarks. On the one hand, Cloutier uses generalities to perform self-censorship—to both avoid speaking explicitly about race and to mime the demands being made. On the other hand, he obscures what is being cast as a threat to so-called freedom: incoming American critical race theory, a position supposedly unimaginably able

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<sup>2</sup>Rémi Quirion and Danielle McCann. *L'Université québécoise du futur: Tendances, enjeux, piste d'action et recommandations* (Fonds de recherche du Québec, 2021): 16.

to spring from a Francophone mind. Actual words, books, lectures, expertise, and data are left unnamed, cast as immovable targets of profanation. The mood is of a temporary suspension for the sake of outsider sensibilities, a false neutrality or decorum to keep it all civil and save face for scientific and technical inquiry (qualifiers notably added to the commission's name after its initial formation). What Cloutier holds back is taken up elsewhere by Québec Premier François Legault, who in September used "woke" as a pejorative against opposition leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois when the latter brought up again the racism and Islamophobia underlying the so-called secularism law, Bill 21. Asked to explain his slight, Legault offered the following: "For me, a woke is someone who sees discrimination everywhere... He's not interested in defending Québec's competencies. He's not interested in defending Québec's values. He wants us to feel guilty for this, so for that reason I called him 'woke.'"<sup>3</sup>

Closing the public hearings in early September, Cloutier presented two possibilities: either the Québec

government puts a law into effect or it makes a clear statement with regards to its position on academic freedom.<sup>4</sup> Whether the response comes down as law or statement, it is sure to be anti-Black. To the commission, to Legault, to the governing Coalition Avenir Québec [Coalition for Québec's Future] party, the question is: What guarantees your freedom? What steadies Québec's values? Where can these convictions be traced to? It would seem, given the events leading up to the commission, that this all rests on the N-word. This word, so sensitive, so necessary to establishing CAQ's project in political identification that if its utterance is disturbed even once then all its freedom is thought lost. The basis on which the commission was deemed necessary makes evident that anti-Blackness is at the foundation of so-called freedom in Québec, with Cloutier eager to promise that this will be made law, as if it wasn't in the first place. In the interim, waiting for Cloutier's conclusions, we're left with his drift. Translation too is a drift, an approximation, but also a current, bringing a shift in direction, air, and pressure. ■

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<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Porter and Marie-Michèle Sioui, "Les «wokes» veulent «faire sentir coupables» les Québécois, selon Legault," *Le Devoir*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.ledevoir.com/politique/quebec/632817/gnd-woke-je-ne-sais-pas-trop-ce-que-ca-veut-dire>

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Pilon-Larose, "« Il y a un réel enjeu », constate Alexandre Cloutier," *La Presse*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/education/2021-09-01/liberte-universitaire/il-y-a-un-reel-enjeu-constate-alexandre-cloutier.php>