Peter MacKinnon, *University Commons Divided: Exploring Debate & Dissent on Campus*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018, 149pp., \$16.22.

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The question of debate and dissent on North American campuses has become vitally important over the last few years. It is bound up with the rise of right-wing populism and intersects with broader questions of intellectual and academic freedom within academic librarianship. Peter MacKinnon's book takes as its starting point the idea that universities are defined, at least in part, by their ability to provide a space for free debate, discussion, and contestation. While the university "commons," MacKinnon argues, can and should be a safe space, it cannot be a comfortable one. "Contestation is inevitable, indeed definitional," he writes, "and with it comes unease, discomfort, and dissent" (x).

MacKinnon sets out the terms of his investigation by presenting two presumptions. In the first place, "the commons that is the subject of this book is a platform or space for the debate, discussion, and collaboration that are both inherent in and essential to the idea of the university" (ix). In the second place, the central mission of the university is "seeking truth through advancing knowledge, learning, and discovery" (ix). These two propositions are axiomatic for MacKinnon—they are uncontested and provide the foundation for his entire argument. It therefore follows that MacKinnon's exploration is undertaken from an explicitly liberal perspective, i.e., one which sees nothing wrong with the state of the society as it is, and so resists a critical attitude upon it. In other words, it is a conservative perspective that seeks to preserve the current conjuncture for those who benefit from it.

In the course of the book, MacKinnon explores various recent cases that have occurred on Canadian campuses, including the Jennifer Berdahl academic freedom case at the University of British Columbia, the question of Trinity Western University's law school, and several disparate cases that MacKinnon includes in an omnibus chapter under the theme of tolerance. With these case studies, MacKinnon seeks to identify the limits between the mission of universities "to develop the human intellect, to enable discernment and to the search for truth, and to resist ignorance,

intellectual laziness, and coercion” (90) on the one hand, and social responsibility on the other. This is a tension that has occupied librarians since at least the 1930s, and in this sense, MacKinnon’s book provides valuable parallels with debates in librarianship.

MacKinnon’s conclusion is that the once-unified commons of the academy has become increasingly divided, a division he ascribes to a crisis of governance. This crisis, MacKinnon argues, has been caused by the weakening of bicameralism (the separation of concerns between the academic and the corporate sides of the academy) by allowing more faculty and student influence on the non-academic side, the transition of many faculty associations to trade unions (though “some of our best universities resisted the move” (107), and increased government regulation. For MacKinnon, responding to these changes “required more managerial ways that were an uneasy fit with academic culture” (108). It is this crisis of governance, MacKinnon argues, that has led to the division within the commons; the lack of clear and transparent governance has allowed the commons (in its aspect of freedom of expression) to come under attack “by a combination of intellectual laziness, ideology, and anger” (114). MacKinnon’s solution, linked to his focus on governance issues, would be to reaffirm the intellectual mission of universities and the integral role played by freedom of expression. “It would acknowledge the potential for discomfort and offence as a result of this freedom and make it clear that neither is a sufficient reason to curb its exercise” (114).

In short, MacKinnon repeats the comfortable liberal pluralist perspective that departure from the norms of civil discussion (from “both sides”) is equally deplorable, and that if a sober centrism were respected, the university could continue in its noble, intellectual, and democratic mission. It is perhaps unfortunate that MacKinnon’s book should have appeared in 2018 when the dangers of such a focus on civility, pluralist tolerance, and aloof detachment have all become abundantly clear, given the rise of right-wing demagoguery and its consequent acts of violence, especially in the United States, where right-wing populism has gained a wide and receptive audience. Indeed, it is significant that MacKinnon’s narrow focus should prevent him from seeing the wider context of his arguments. Commitment to left or right, the abandonment of a liberal centrism, is not due to some autonomous “laziness, ideology, and anger” (114) but to real political stakes involving the lives of real people, faculty and students among them. When MacKinnon argues that neither “discomfort [nor] offence . . . is sufficient reason to curb” (114) the exercise of free expression, he does not recognize that the terms of these debates have moved beyond discomfort and offence, to the very real right of people to exist without fear of violence and death. This is not hyperbole: I am writing this barely a week after the murderous attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Among many other positions that he has held within academia, Peter MacKinnon was a law professor and a university president (for 15 years). He has also served as chair of various academic associations and councils and is the author of a 2014 book on university leadership and public policy. The combination of law, university governance, and public policy gives MacKinnon a particular legal and institutional perspective that is refreshing in its clarity. However, MacKinnon's respect for legal and academic institutions limits him to a deontological perspective on the ethical problems he presents as case studies. If only the rules of civil discourse and academic governance were obeyed, the problems he identifies would either not arise or have been dealt with in a way guaranteed to preserve the integrity of the commons, academic freedom, and free expression. In this sense, MacKinnon's ethical position and his liberalism are aspects of the same perspective. The problem is that, despite the clarity of MacKinnon's presentation, this is not a perspective that offers anything new to academic librarians; indeed, it is the perspective we hear very often, in almost every debate on intellectual freedom in librarianship. It is, for example, the dominant perspective of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. The empirical case studies make this book worth acquiring, but there are few insights to be gained from the centrism of MacKinnon's perspective.