

April 10, 2009

STATEMENT BY DENIS RANCOURT REGARDING HIS DISMISSAL BY THE
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

I was fired by the University of Ottawa on March 31, 2009. I was fired under the false pretext of having arbitrarily assigned high grades in one course in the winter 2008 semester. All relevant documents have been made public at <http://academicfreedom.ca/>.

In order to fire me the university had to dispense with due process. In the words of the professors' union's lawyer, my dismissal was *“both a denial of substantive and procedural rights [...] and a contravention of the basic principles of natural justice.”*

Until my firing I was for the whole of my 23 year career, a professor of physics at the University of Ottawa. I was tenured and had occupied the highest academic rank of Full Professor since 1997. I am recognized as an expert in my profession and have taught over 2000 students.

Throughout my tenure, my overriding goal has been to give my students the highest quality of education, affording them the best possible means of learning and understanding a sometimes difficult and daunting subject. To achieve this I have researched pedagogy, conferred with professional physics education researchers, and implemented many new teaching techniques. I have developed several unique and very popular undergraduate and graduate courses, including the Physics and the Environment (Physique et environnement) course, the Science in Society course, and a graduate interdisciplinary course in measurement and characterization methods in science. The Science in Society elective course had to be given in the largest auditorium on campus to accommodate the registered and community participants. The Physics and the Environment required course was considered one of the most motivating courses in the Environmental Studies (ES) program: The executive members of the ES Student Association have referred to me as a “phenomenal teacher” and to the course as “extremely enriching ... individualized ... empower[ing]” and as “creat[ing] a positive learning environment where inspired students gained confidence and courage” (Letter to the dean of science dated March 15, 2007).

I have paired this teaching profile with a strong research effort, receiving throughout my entire career some of the largest research grants in the Faculty of Science. I have one of the highest scientific impact factors (h-index) in the entire Faculty, with an h-index of 25. To put this in perspective, my present scientific impact factor is more than twice that of the dean of the Faculty of Science, 40% higher than that of the present chairman of the physics department, 80% higher than that of the present chairman of chemistry, and more than twice that of the previous chairman of physics. In 2008, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) reviewed my research and renewed my grant through 2013. Such research success had been expected, because I started my

university career under the prestigious NSERC University Research Fellow program, following a national competition among newly sponsored university professors. In 2001, after I obtained the largest NSERC Strategic Project Grant ever obtained in the Faculty of Science, to study boreal forest lakes for five years, the university put out full-page-width advertisements in the *Globe and Mail*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, *Le Droit*, and *Silicon Valley North* featuring me and my research group and entitled "*Can you recognize Canada's university of the 21st century? Denis Rancourt, LSSE group*" (LSSE = Lake Sediment Structure and Evolution). I have supervised more than 80 junior research terms or degrees at all levels from post-doctoral fellow to graduate students to NSERC undergraduate researchers. I have been an invited plenary, keynote, or special session speaker at major conferences nearly 40 times, an exceptional number by Faculty of Science standards. To put this in perspective, many past and present science department chairs and deans have never been a plenary or keynote speaker at an international scientific conference.

No reasonable person, and in fact so far not a single person or organization who has examined the background of my dismissal, lends any credibility to the university's claim that my grading in one course, one year ago, is the real reason for its recent actions. How can a disagreement about grading possibly justify ordering the university police to remove a tenured professor from campus, banning him from campus, assigning his graduate students to other faculty, firing his postdoctoral research fellow, and summarily firing him without due process?

The university's pretext for firing me is particularly ironic given its *Vision 2010* strategic plan, which states that the university will "*Support and recognize initiatives designed to implement a range of new and diversified strategies for learning and evaluation.*"

The lack of due process in the university's recent actions is also alarming and is a threat to the principle of tenure. The dean simply asserted that my grading was not part of my teaching method and thereby circumvented a formal evaluation of my teaching without my ever being heard by a committee of my peers, as foreseen by the due process rules in place.

In recent years, I have become an advocate of various reforms, all with the purpose of making the University of Ottawa a stronger and better institution. I have expressed concerns about university policy on such issues as the Student Code of Conduct and Deaf-community access to campus events. I have also been an outspoken advocate and practitioner of greater democracy in the institution in:

- the choice of pedagogical method
- the development of the syllabus
- the choice of community service offerings
- the right to challenge established practice
- the selection of course content

and I have communicated my views on a variety of broad societal issues, including:

- environmental concerns
- professional ethics

- the Palestine-Israel conflict
- the influences of lobby groups and the media in our representative democracy

The university's response to the concerns that I have raised has been to attempt to silence me through a series of disciplinary actions based on various false pretexts. All of these actions have either been dismissed, abandoned by the university, rejected by an arbitrator, or are heading to arbitration for likely rejection. The latest pretext used by the university, the grading issue, will not be upheld, for obvious reasons already determined by a previous arbitration award. The June 2008 decision of arbitrator Michel G. Picher established that all the pedagogical initiatives that I implemented in 2005, including non-conventional grading as an integral part of the teaching method, were under the purview of a professor's academic freedom [Endnote-1].

It appears that among the real reasons for the university's attempts to discipline me since September 2005 and for its recent most harsh actions against me under President Allan Rock's mandate might be the administration's opposition to my political views about the Palestine-Israel conflict, which, starting in 2005, I have expressed in articles, on radio, in my blog postings, at public venues, and in my classes. In September 2005 the dean cancelled my Physics and the Environment course following a complaint (regarding an email comment about Zionism), channelled through the university's Canadian Studies Institute director Pierre Anctil to the VP-Academic. A complaint against an invited speaker in the course, Professor Michel Chossudovsky – who spoke about Middle East geopolitics, from the Jewish Student Association then gave rise to a sustained but failed attempt to discipline me. In 2006 I invited two Canadian-Palestinian speakers to address the class in my Science in Society course. This was followed by a damning January-2007 editorial in *The Ottawa Citizen* and I was subsequently removed from teaching all the first-year courses that I had developed. *The Ottawa Citizen* is a CanWest newspaper and its director is a member of the university's Board of Governors [Endnote-2]. CanWest Global Communications Corporation is a staunch advocate and supporter of Israeli policy. In 2007 I criticized the university's official position on the academic boycott of Israel on my UofOWatch.blogspot.com blog. The repression against me intensified when new university president Allan Rock, a staunch supporter of Israeli policy [Endnote-3], arrived on the scene in July 2008. I was disciplined for the UofOWatch blog with an unpaid suspension in September 2008, by a decision of the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors (EBOG). The latter suspension was followed by many more severe actions against me (see below) and is being used by the university as an argument in my dismissal.

The university became markedly more aggressive in its attacks against me after the arrival of Allan Rock in July 2008. Whereas, previous disciplines that started in 2005 were limited to letters of reprimand and of allegation (all withdrawn or overturned), the arrival of former federal politician and proven supporter of Israeli policy Allan Rock coincided with:

- my removal from all teaching
- a one-day suspension without pay for my blog critical of the university,
- an unannounced lockout from my laboratory actuated under false pretext,

- dismantling of my laboratory,
- my removal from my graduate students,
- reprisals and intimidations against my graduate students,
- university-imposed unilateral deregistration of my undergraduate research student,
- an unannounced firing of my research associate of 12 years,
- my suspension from all my duties,
- my physical barring from campus, including from my weekly campus radio show,
- a lockout from my office,
- my police arrest under a false claim of trespassing while hosting my regular weekly Cinema Academica event,
- public university statements defaming me, and
- my dismissal – allegedly for having assigned twenty three A+s in a combined fourth-year and graduate physics course.

The March 31st university decision to dismiss me was itself tainted with Israel-aligned political influence. The decision was made by the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors (EBOG) with members Allan Rock and Ruth Freiman present. I expressed my concern as follows, in my March 31st supplementary brief that the university refused to receive:

-----start of quote from supplementary brief-----

“ETHICAL CONDUCT OF EBOG

From the "Code of Ethical Conduct and Responsibilities of Members of the BOG of the University of Ottawa":

2(b) "undue influence: a Member has a private or personal interest sufficient to impair, influence, or appear to influence, the objective exercise of his or her official duties as a Member of the BOG."

5 Note: Members are required to declare and disclose potential conflicts of interest. "A Member who has declared a conflict of interest shall absent himself or herself during a discussion and vote in connection with the conflict"

9 Responsibilities of Members:

(c) "be independent and impartial"

(d) "not be influenced by self-interest, outside pressure, political considerations or fear of criticism."

(e) "not allow past or existing financial, business, professional, family or social relationships or responsibilities to influence his or her conduct or judgement"

Ruth Freiman is the wife of A.J. Freiman, grandson of A.J. Freiman, the founding leader of the Zionist Organization of Canada. Ms Freiman and her family have had a long-standing close relationship with the pro-Israel community in Ottawa and Canada. Ms. Freiman is herself a member of the Board of Directors of the Hillel Academy, whose

"core values" include "appreciating the centrality of the State of Israel to Jewish identity" and whose programmes are intended to instil a "connection to Israel."

My criticism of Israel has been and remains an issue in disciplinary proceedings before the EBOG [...]. According to the "Code" Ms. Freiman has been obliged to declare her personal and family relationships to pro-Israel organizations, which she has not done (see minutes of the September 11, 2008, EBOG meeting, ...). Moreover, given these relationships, she has been obliged to recuse herself from proceedings against me. Whether or not her relationships have or will influence her actions, they certainly constitute "undue influence" insofar as they "appear to influence" her conduct, and her continued participation in these proceedings is thus expressly prohibited by the "Code."

[...]

In addition, A.J. Freiman was instrumental in setting up the University of Ottawa's Centre for Canadian Jewish Studies with Pierre Anctil and Seymour Mayne; Pierre Anctil played a role in my discipline case and past arbitration related to the dean's cancellation of a 2005 course [...]"

-----end of quote from supplementary brief-----

The facts indicate that my dismissal has little to do with grading in one course and is blatantly political. Such repression violates the most fundamental principles underlying academia -- academic freedom, professional independence and responsibility, and due process -- and is a threat to the integrity of all universities.

It also appears that the university's true objective, and a direct consequence of its actions, in first suspending me and then firing me for motives based in bad faith, is to end not only my employment, but also my career, thereby causing me considerable personal losses in addition to dissolution of my research group.

I call on all students, academics, workers, and concerned citizens to protest the University of Ottawa's political firing of me. Letters and petitions are being posted at <http://academicfreedom.ca/> . These public protests will have an impact in the campaign to reinstate me.

Denis Rancourt

[My support committee, the Committee for the Defense of Education, can be contacted at: claudio.cde@gmail.com . The Chair of the committee is psychology professor Claude Lamontagne.]

[Endnote-1]: Regarding academic freedom in Canada, consider the benchmark Statement of Institutional Purpose (University of Toronto): “*Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself. It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.*”

[Endnote-2]: The March 31, 2008, issue of *La Rotonde* reported that *The Ottawa Citizen* and the University of Ottawa had entered into a contract agreement whereby the university named a campus space the “Ottawa Citizen Terrace” (inaugurated in May 2006) in exchange for 1 million dollars in free advertising over five years and “editorial support.” A second negative editorial against me was published in *The Ottawa Citizen* on April 7, 2009, after my dismissal.

[Endnote-3]: Allan Rock’s ardent support for Israeli policy is evidenced both in his political career and in his actions on campus as president at the University of Ottawa: In 2004, under Martin’s Liberal government and as Canada’s Ambassador to the UN, Allan Rock changed Canada’s longstanding foreign policy on Israel from abstaining on human rights resolutions for Palestine to being one of the few countries in the World that vote with the US and Israel against UN human rights resolutions for Palestine. In July 2008 the media reported that Allan Rock participated in a trip to Israel “partly financed by the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA)”, along with five other Canadian university presidents. The media reported that Mr. Rock’s visit “yielded immediate results” as “the University of Ottawa agreed to launch an exchange program in law.” After a few months in office, President Allan Rock announced his plan in October 2008 for the University of Ottawa. This plan included what he calls putting “Canada’s University in the service of the World”. In explaining it to students on October 24, 2008, he talked about exchange programs. When one student asked if Palestinian students would be allowed to participate in the exchange programs with Israel, Mr. Rock stated that he could not answer that. In the fall of 2008, the University of Ottawa chapter of the independent student-run Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) took a principled stand in line with its mission statement and refused to sponsor a Hillel event due to that organization's stated unqualified support for Israeli policy. Allan Rock responded by pressuring the student union (SFUO) president to write a letter condemning OPIRG. A letter from the SFUO president delineated the administrative relationships between the SFUO and OPIRG and this letter was made public by Allan Rock on his president’s “Rock Talk” blog. Allan Rock also publicly stated that he would look for an “administrative” mechanism to deny OPIRG student-levy funding (which has been approved by a student referendum). In 2009 the Rock administration banned a student poster announcing Israeli Apartheid Week – a move widely criticized in some media such as the CBC and in the student media. This type of interventions by a president of the University of Ottawa in the affairs of student groups and associations was unprecedented.

It is consistent with the increased political influences in recent years from pro-Israel-policy groups on Canadian campuses – documented in the media, such as in this CBC-Ottawa radio report: <http://cbc.ca/ottawa/media/audio/allinaday/20090220carleton.ram> .