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Title: Toronto Public Library under fire over event by controversial speaker

Authors: PAOLA LORIGGIO

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Toronto Public Library under fire over event by controversial speaker

TORONTO _ The Toronto Public Library is coming under fire over its refusal to cancel an event featuring a speaker who believes transgender rights endanger women, with several authors vowing to boycott the institution's events in light of its decision.

An online petition that had gathered more than 2,500 signatures by Wednesday afternoon says the library is providing a platform for Meghan Murphy to spread hate speech.

The petition, started by authors Alicia Elliott, Catherine Hernandez and Carrienne Leung, says the publishing professionals who sign it will no longer participate in events at the library if the talk is allowed to go ahead on Oct. 29.

"We are shocked that our public institutions we hold in regard would allow Murphy to have a platform while purporting to uphold community values. More than that, we feel betrayed," the petition reads.

"Offering Murphy a platform means denying the resources and promise of safe and equitable space to trans communities."

Hernandez said she had moved her book launch, scheduled for this Sunday, to a local bookstore. Several other authors, including novelist and poet Zoe Whittall and cartoonist Kate Beaton, tweeted their support for the petition.

Murphy, a freelance writer who runs the website "Feminist Current," has written that "allowing men to identify as women" endangers women and undermines women's rights.

She has also said trans women should not be allowed in women's washrooms, writing that "there is absolutely no reason why it is necessary to allow people to access washrooms based on their personality, feelings, or clothing choices, versus their sex."

Murphy said Wednesday she has faced similar opposition at previous events, but nonetheless found the backlash "shocking and baffling."

"It's really shocking to see people who are writers wanting to force a library to censor speech that they disagree with," she told The Canadian Press. "You would think that writers would be standing up for free expression and free speech."

Murphy said she did not organize the event or choose the location, but was invited to speak by a group. She added the group _ identified on the event as Radical Feminists Unite _ told her it was turned away by other sites before renting space at the library.

The library, meanwhile, said it is aware that the event has caused "anger and concern" but maintains it has an obligation to protect free speech.

"We would also suggest that engaging in respectful civil discourse with people of opposing views may be a more productive strategy than abstaining from public library events," it said in a statement.

"Libraries have always been committed to supporting vulnerable communities by welcoming and creating space for different perspectives rather than through censorship."

The organization also said it does not believe Murphy's talk, titled "Gender Identity: What does It Mean for Society, the Law and Women?," violates its rental policy.

The policy says the library can cancel any third-party event that would promote "discrimination, contempt or hatred for any group or person on the basis of race, ethnic origin, place of origin, citizenship, colour, ancestry, language, creed, age, sex, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, disability, political affiliation, membership in a union or staff association, receipt of public assistance, level of literacy or any other similar factor."

The library also noted Murphy has never been charged or convicted of hate speech offences.

Elliott, one of the petition's organizers, said Murphy's previous statements on trans people are publicly available and should be taken into account in assessing the nature of the event.

The library's policy on discrimination does not mention criminal charges, and that should not be the determining criteria, she said. "We're supposed to say only people who have met this very high threshold are not allowed to spread discrimination within public institutions? That's ridiculous," she said.

By allowing the event to take place at its location, the library makes it seem like gender identity is up for debate, Elliott said.

"These groups bank on using libraries to give them some sort of validation, to make them seem normalized," she said. Libraries "cannot both say that they are supporting trans communities and then also allow people in to debate whether (trans people) should have legal protection under the law."

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association said the argument that libraries should be a safe space creates a slippery slope given that many books contain ideas and words that may be offensive. As long as there is no illegal activity taking place, the library should make space for all views, the association said.

"I don't want to detract from how the people that are targeted by this expression feel _ I understand and I don't doubt their sincerity and I think it's legitimate to feel that way," said Cara Zwibel, director of the CCLA's fundamental freedoms program.

"But I also feel like we've come to a place where we're really willing to shut down discussion and to deplatform speakers because we don't like what they have to say."

The Vancouver Public Library faced similar backlash in January when it allowed Murphy to speak at one of its locations. The library was later banned from participating in that city's Pride events, with organizers citing the decision to greenlight Murphy's event.

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