Making McGill Mediocre

A Response to the (Draft) Final Report of the Principal’s Task Force on Diversity, Excellence and Community Engagement

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I wish to encourage my colleagues, busy as they are with other pressing matters, to pay close attention to the Task Force report, which bears enormously on our common future. I will state immediately my own view, viz., that the report charts a course, not for enhanced excellence, but for the most appalling mediocrity, through the institutionalization of an ideological bias foreign to the mission and mandate of McGill.

The report points out that, as ‘Canada’s pre-eminent research-intensive university, and the only Canadian institution ranked in the top 25 universities by the Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings for five years running, McGill attracts some of the brightest students and professors from around the world.’ But what is its prescription for preserving this reputation? What in particular does the report suggest that McGill should be doing better, or doing differently? The answer is ‘growing our engagement with diversity’ – which sounds innocent enough but is in fact a proposal for a thoroughgoing ‘culture change’ at McGill that would re-make our university after the image of some of the worst institutions to be found on either side of the border.

It should be noted at the outset that the Task Force is in a certain sense a creature of the Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) Office, a recent extension of the McGill bureaucracy that, as a consciousness-raising enterprise, is *sui generis*. Not surprisingly, it took as its point of departure an invited presentation by a ‘diversity’ specialist, Dr Alma Clayton-Pedersen of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), who ‘after her visit ... generously offered a report on her impressions of McGill’s existing and proposed efforts to increase the diversity of McGill’s learning environment.’ In that report, Clayton-Pedersen herself flags the controversial nature of

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1 p. 34 (Appendix E)
2 SEDE was established in 2005/2006. Its website does not contain a history of the Office but indicates, *inter alia*, that it ‘works to create innovative and engaging ways of raising awareness and capturing the University’s interest in issues of social equity and diversity’. Some related background can be found at http://www.mcgill.ca/queerequity/history/; cf. http://www.mcgill.ca/reporter/39/06/socialequity/.
3 p. 29 (Appendix C)
this cultural revolution, so I am hardly the first to do so. But I will do so in my own way, returning to Clayton-Pedersen in due course.4

1. Addressing McGill’s Culture of Exclusion

One of the key assumptions of the Task Force is that McGill has a ‘culture of exclusion’ and a problem – a serious and endemic problem – of marginalization:

Various submissions to the Task Force argued forcefully that minoritization and marginalization are endemic to the fabric of western educational practice and are a historically engrained and ongoing problem. Simply put, they argued that McGill’s record of faculty diversity—where the number of people of colour, women and LGBTQ persons are limited and where many individuals from these groups feel excluded—points directly to a culture of institutional exclusion and racism. It was further argued that the structural aspects of this ongoing problem need to be addressed swiftly, dramatically, and universally, throughout the University; moreover, the ability of the current Joint Senate/Board Committee on Equity and its subcommittees to adequately address these issues was questioned.5

I take this to be an assumption, not merely because admission of some such guilty legacy is de rigueur in the program outlined by the AACU, but because no attempt is made in the report to defend McGill from these grave charges. Indeed, many of its recommendations rest on there being real substance to them – this in spite of the fact that, so far as I am aware, we have not previously been supplied with compelling evidence to show that the charges are true, or that we are indeed implicated in a culture of exclusion and racism and the like.

At all events, its critics in this process insist that McGill ‘needs to recognize the negative cumulative effects of a lack of congruence between words, policy and action – specifically in the realm of diversity.’6 It needs, for example, to reckon with the fact that ‘roll-out of the 2007 Employment and Equity Policy’ has not been very effective and that hiring has gone on pretty much as before; that ‘uptake of diversity training has been low’ and interest in such matters lagging.7 And the report seems to agree. McGill must do more, it maintains – much more – to show that it is interested in diversity. According to the Task Force’s own ‘aspirational statement’:

4 The report is available at http://www.mcgill.ca/principal/diversityexcellenceandcommunity/. I am sure that some colleagues who were involved with the Task Force or its hearings will be surprised to see such a reading of it as I offer here. Let me be clear that I do not mean to offer a comprehensive account of the work the Task Force undertook, or any account at all of any particular member’s views or motives, of which I have no knowledge. I do mean to offer a reading of it that can be defended over against theirs.

5 p. 17 (Appendix A) Appendix A, like some of the other appendices, provides a report within the report, in this case an ‘overview of community concerns’.

6 p. 19 (Appendix A)

7 ibid. Among other things, the 2007 policy introduced as a recruitment target ‘people of minority sexual orientations and gender identities’.
Without a community comprising individuals with varied backgrounds and viewpoints, we will not be able to achieve the excellence to which we aspire. We recognize that diversity is reflected not only in race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability, but also in language, sexual orientation, gender identity, community, politics, culture, way of life, economic status, and interests. Our policies reflect and support our diversity through hiring, promotion and recognition, with the goal of creating and sustaining a spirit of inclusivity, openness, and respect that extends throughout the University, an intellectually-diverse community, in which everyone can fully participate and where diverse opinions, methodologies, and ideologies are welcome.\textsuperscript{8}

Like a church, to borrow St Paul’s expression, McGill must become a place where ‘there are a variety of gifts but the same spirit’. But how is it to do that? How (to employ a metaphor more in keeping with the report) can McGill crank up its inclusive – that is, its diversity-producing – machinery? That is the immediate and pressing question that the report addresses.

2. \textit{Associating Diversity with Excellence}

The first move is rhetorical. ‘Diversity’ is linked to something that no one (except perhaps Bill Readings) can possibly object to, and that something is ‘excellence’.\textsuperscript{9} The latter concept must be adapted, of course, to make room for the former: ‘an expanded notion of excellence’, one that focuses on life-experience and community engagement, is what is required in order to overcome the narrow scholarly focus that has hitherto prevailed at McGill. Achievement, after all, ‘comes in many forms’, does it not?\textsuperscript{10}

This expanded notion of excellence can then be used to practical effect, for example, in the tenure and promotion process, where ‘the evaluation of publication output often focuses solely on high-impact academic journals, without due consideration of community-based work and publications’; or in academic programs that ‘recognize only a limited range of academic credentials’.\textsuperscript{11} Errors such as these can be corrected by insisting on the value of something called ‘intellectual diversity’.

Now several things should be noticed here before we turn to the intended practical effects, if only in preparation for things that will have to be said later.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} p. 6
\item \textsuperscript{9} ‘Early in their deliberations, Task Force members reached consensus on the strong links between excellence, diversity and community engagement at McGill’ (ibid.); that is, they swallowed more or less whole the AACU codswallop. (My reference to Readings is to \textit{The University in Ruins}, Harvard 1996).
\item \textsuperscript{10} p. 6; cf. p. 15 (Appendix A). It is somewhat disconcerting that the aspirational statement of the Task Force and the ‘overview of community concerns’ are virtually mirror images of each other; this suggests a rather incestuous relationship between the reporters and the reported.
\item \textsuperscript{11} p. 15 (Appendix A)
\item \textsuperscript{12} This term first appears at p. 8. See further below.
\end{itemize}
First, a tension if not a contradiction: McGill is said to be excellent, and excellence is said to entail diversity, yet McGill is said to be significantly lacking in diversity. It seems, then, that excellence is not something McGill has but something to which it aspires. Or rather, excellence is something to which some people aspire on McGill’s behalf.

Second, neither diversity nor excellence are ever defined in the report, except by reference to each other – one of a good many features that make this document embarrassing for its own lack of excellence. Its reasoning indeed is circular. ‘To value and recognize intellectual diversity is to recognize that there is a range of paths to excellence.’ To be excellent, on the other hand, is to recognize the value of intellectual diversity: ‘Simply put, intellectual diversity should be understood as an important component of excellence. Concretely, this means that McGill should work diligently to recognize and support a diversity of research methodologies, publication outcomes, tenure evaluation schemes, and such.’

Third, and still more embarrassing, there is no diversity in this document of a proper intellectual kind – the kind that makes possible a real argument. It shows no sign, for example, of having wrestled with any serious doubts about the coherence or consequences its own thesis on diversity and excellence. It does insist in passing that ‘any perceived antagonism between the values of diversity and of excellence is unfounded, because diversity is a necessary foundation of excellence in this century.’ This, however, is merely an act of dismissal, not of engagement, with contrary views. But then, if the ‘perceived antagonism’ is not dismissed – if in fact academic excellence is not dependent on the kind of diversity touted by the report, and if a focus on that kind of diversity can even inhibit academic excellence – the entire report is exposed as groundless and its recommendations as worse than useless. That is a possibility I think we must consider.

Fourth, the emphasis on this ‘intellectual diversity’ that is preached rather than practiced results in advice than which none more anodyne can be conceived, unless of course we are to receive it instead as the cynical counsel of extreme relativism: ‘strive to promote innovative approaches to the curriculum and encourage professors and students alike to be open to varied ideas and multiple perspectives.’ The report’s

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13 p. 15 (Appendix A). A definition can be found, however, on p. 6 of Clayton-Pedersen’s briefing paper. There it turns out that diversity is something one does rather than something one encounters: ‘AAC&U’s major initiative, Making Excellence Inclusive, defines diversity in a campus context to mean an active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with differences—in people, in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect—in ways that increase one’s awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions. Such differences can be individual (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) or group/social (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations). Making Excellence Inclusive further defines inclusion as the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity...’ Just how one engages with an engagement is not made clear.

14 p. 15 (Appendix A)

15 p. 6
claim to the new century notwithstanding, this sounds a lot like the platitudes of the latter half of the old century, which in the sixties and seventies began passing through our Education faculties into the schoolhouses of the nation, undermining the culture of excellence they once had. Only now it is the university itself – already reeling, some would say, under the impact of too many students who have not been taught how to think or write clearly, or how to engage the present through sound knowledge of the past – that is being targeted.

The strategy designed for this new target is to replace the selectivity intrinsic to authentic academic excellence with another kind of selectivity, which may aptly be dubbed (if our biochemists don’t mind) ‘diversity profiling’. The best way to get at that is to consider what the report actually says about strategies and practical effects. And, make no mistake, on this level it is anything but anodyne, as those who wade through its recommendations (and the AACU document behind it) will eventually see.16

3. Creating a Preferential Option for the Diverse

The desired change in McGill’s culture requires both champions of change and instruments of change. Rhetoric alone will not do. The rhetoric must be given legs, so to say, and teeth as well. So the next move is to generate bureaucratic support for change and create mechanisms of enforcement.

How exactly to go about this was, apparently, a subject of some dispute, though the dispute (as we shall see) seems to have resolved itself into strong support for one particular administrative proposal.

Two strategies have been suggested for the resolution of many of the issues raised by authors of submissions and members of the Task Force. The creation of a ‘champion’ position has been suggested, one in line with similar positions that exist at various peer universities. Such a position would involve acting as an advocate for both inclusion and community engagement. Conversely, it has been argued that a new administrative position will do little to effect the wide-ranging culture change necessary to properly effect meaningful change on these issues. But there is general consensus for accountability so that progress will be monitored and seen.17

16 The final three pages of ‘Making Excellence Inclusive’ provide a very useful summary in columnar form (http://www.aacu.org/inclusive_excellence/documents/MEIPaperUpdate8.09Revised8.13.09.pdf). Columns labeled ‘Traditional notions of excellence’ are accompanied by columns labeled ‘Inclusive notions of excellence ALSO include’ – meaning of course that what is intended is addition not substitution. This, however, is a dodge, since the whole project seeks to substitute ‘inclusivism’ for ‘traditionalism’, the proponents of which are ‘at odds’, as Clayton-Pedersen observes (Report, p. 30). At several points the tension between the columns emerges into open contradiction (for example, at p. 9, traditional administrators who ‘view diversity as the province of one or a few designated people and/or offices’, as opposed to those who themselves manifest no less than seven traits of a good inclusivist).

17 p. 19 (Appendix A). This passage does not present two strategies, but rather contrary views of one strategy, but we may leave that aside.
According to this general consensus, McGill should, among other things, provide diversity training ‘to academic and administrative leaders and members of committees for hiring, promotion, and awards (e.g., CRC chairs, internal McGill chairs, honorary doctorates, etc.)’ and ‘provide resources to ensure proactive and sustainable programs aimed at increasing and maintaining diversity in qualified faculty, staff and senior leadership.’ It should also ‘develop sustained and multi-stranded relationships with communities outside the University – especially those whose members are underrepresented at McGill – that build on our strengths in teaching, research, and scholarship; that respect the communities’ values; and that advance co-constructed goals’. Moreover, it should ‘designate a person or office to document, coordinate, and facilitate community-outreach projects across the University, in collaboration with Faculty- and department-based champions.’

If I am reading rightly, it is one of the main burdens of the document to lend support to this last proposal, which means in effect turning the newly created position of Associate Provost (Policy, Procedures and Equity) into a true champion of intellectual diversity at McGill.

We therefore welcome the creation of the position of Associate Provost (Policies, Procedures and Equity), as an individual who will provide some of the necessary leadership. Our expectation is that the incumbent of this position will offer pro-active guidance and oversight and support coordination of our efforts with regard to equity and diversity issues, rather than simply monitor what is done or enforce compliance... [W]e see the new position as one that will provide a champion for equity, encouraging the University to enhance diversity—including physical and intellectual diversity—not only in recruitment of academic staff, but also in other areas. It is also our expectation that the Associate Provost will play an important role in the Senior Administration, offering authoritative counsel on equity issues, and will report annually to Senate and the Board of Governors with information about our progress.

Now a page seems to have been taken here, not from St Paul, but rather from the Politique Québécoise de lutte contre l’homophobie, with its call for ‘a minister responsible for the fight’, for the marshalling of inter-departmental resources, and for ‘rigorous monitoring and assessment mechanisms’ to ensure that everyone falls in line with the lutte’s ambitious objective: the total eradication of heteronormativity. The objectives of the present document are broader, of course, and the means for achieving them more

18 p. 9
19 p. 11
20 ‘Policies, Procedures, and Equity’ is an enormously expansive portfolio. While it includes oversight of SEDE, it is not yet clear how central to it, or how dominant, will be the specific interests that cluster under that umbrella. ‘Early in its discussions,’ however, ‘the Task Force recommended a greater emphasis and more pro-active involvement on the highest levels at McGill with regard to equity issues’ (p. 13).
21 p. 13
22 Heteronormativity, as its opponents call it, privileges male–female relations over same-sex relations – an undeniably endemic practice, albeit for perfectly sound reasons, as I have suggested elsewhere (see http://www.ccrl.ca/index.php?ld=5091).
modest, but not so modest as to eschew intervention in any of the main areas of university life or in McGill’s ‘overall strategic plans’. While I do not mean to suggest that the Task Force saw itself as a participant in the Government’s lutte – that would be intolerable at an independent university – I will say that its recommendations smack of the same intrusiveness and heavy-handedness.

Nowhere is that more visible than on the hiring front, where there is to be a new focus on diversity profiling or, in the preferred euphemism, diversity enhancement. New guidelines will be developed ‘to help departments conduct academic searches.’ One Working Group tells us that in that process there must be ‘higher rates of disclosure of information relating to diversity’. Presumably that means enquiry into ‘race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability, but also [into] language, sexual orientation, gender identity, community, politics, culture, way of life, economic status, and interests.’ If so, it promises to make candidate files somewhat thicker – to say nothing of making interviews, and committee debates about what is discovered in these areas, rather trickier. In any case, it must be ensured

that all units of the University adopt the commitment to diversity in relation to academic, administrative, and support staff. In particular, Human Resources should develop the capacity to fully embrace its crucial role in the implementation of the University’s Employment Equity Policy (2007). This policy calls for positive measures to increase applicant pools, and implementation will require Human Resources to be proactive at many stages of recruitment and retention processes and to co-operate with other units or groups in the University working on equity and diversity issues.

In other words, in hiring there is to be a preferential option for the diverse; that is, for those who fit the profile for diversity enhancement. And this, we must assume, will not impact negatively the quality of our hirings. Why not? Because diversity is excellence and excellent diversity. By definition, it can only improve the quality.

One can think of difficulties, of course, though they are not mentioned in the report. Short-lists, for example, that by the time they are sufficiently diverse are no longer open to the top candidates, as top candidates would once have been conceived. Other difficulties we will encounter shortly.

4. Aligning Intellectual Diversity with Natural or Cultural Diversity

If we step back from the report a little, we can see in it something like the general

23 p. 13
24 p. 22 (Appendix B); cf. p. 13.
25 p. 23 (Appendix B)
26 ‘McGill’s ability to attract the best and brightest and to contribute meaningfully to the world at large will be fundamentally linked to its ability to reflect the diversity of concerns and people that make up the communities in which the University functions’ (p. 14; cf. also p. 8).
pattern traced by Ian Hacking in other social constructionist endeavours. On that pattern the claim is made that a feature of a given society – in this case, McGill’s putative culture of marginalization – has been formed by unexamined or undesirable assumptions (about minority groups, say, or their sexual practices) that in their habitual or institutionalized expression have a negative impact on the feelings and prospects of existing or potential members of the society; and that this feature and these assumptions can be altered by efforts at transformation or reconstruction, including (especially in Foucaultian mode) the manipulation of cultural or institutional instruments of power. As we have already discovered, the main effort here is being directed towards the transformation of the concept of academic excellence to include intellectual diversity, in justification of proposed policy and polity remedies that include the establishment of a new power base within the administration. But what exactly is ‘intellectual diversity’?

Diversity, in the first instance, referred (however it referred) both to fixed categories like race or sex and to elective categories like community or even way of life. Intellectual diversity – though it is difficult to be sure – seems to refer to the different mental habits, insights, methods, and perspectives characteristic to these categories; that is, to a mélange or ferment of outlooks produced at least in part by the traits and experiences belonging to various races, religions, sexual sub-cultures, and so forth. Only by immersing ourselves in this mélange can we participate in intellectual diversity and so develop appropriately.

Now there is reason to be uneasy here. For one thing, there is an obvious danger in the fixed categories of falling back into those very ‘isms’ we are supposed to be eradicating (racism, sexism, etc.), however much we ‘expand’ the notion of excellence to accommodate different intellectual characteristics. For another thing, the elective categories are uncertainly related to the fixed categories and seem to broaden out endlessly – as if established respect for the fixed categories were being used to lever into privileged position any number of traits, practices, choices, opinions, and ideologies. But, more fundamentally, do we really want to maintain a link between either set of categories and ‘intellectual diversity’, much less academic excellence?

That is the question that must be answered in dealing with this report, for its attempt to link them is the key to the whole business. Since everyone already agrees that a university is a place where a wide range of ‘opinions, methodologies, and ideologies’ will be granted a hearing and subjected to critical enquiry, everything peculiar to the report depends upon the soundness of that link.


28 As Clayton-Pedersen has it, ‘diversity of ... life experiences represented in an environment not only cannot be separated from one’s intellectual development, these experiences are the foundational scaffolding [sic] upon which learning acumen is built’ (p. 30, Appendix C). But see again n. 13 above.

29 The quoted phrase is from the aspirational statement on p. 6, but the talk there is all about ‘varied ideas and multiple perspectives’; the ‘and subjected to critical enquiry’ is my anti-relativist interpolation.
The report, please observe, never tells us exactly what the link is. It does not tell us how intellectual diversity is associated with race, on the one hand, or way of life on the other. It does not tell us how or why we should take either into account when judging academic excellence. But it does seem to say that intellectual diversity is only possible where racial, sexual, and cultural diversity – the report has a curious habit of leaving out religious diversity, which surely cannot be left out – are integral components of campus life and academic policies and procedures.

About this too we should be uneasy. Does it not entail in principle a denial of intellectual diversity, hence of academic excellence, to single-sex schools, religious schools, ethnic schools, very small schools, etc.? Could we possibly stand by that in our relations with such schools? On the other hand, does it not require us to ask whether a given decision, action, or program at McGill can lay claim to excellence if it cannot demonstrate its pedigree in intellectual diversity? Have the Muslim, the Sikh, the Hindu, the Catholic, the Baptist groups, been heard on the matter? The various LGBTQ groups? The Francophone and Aboriginal and Chinese groups? I won’t go on, but if our categories are to be as open and our terminology as vague as what we find in this report, we shall soon find that we have to go on and on, like some dysfunctional parliamentary committee or other.

To be quite blunt, it is astonishing that this report should make intellectual diversity contingent upon biological and cultural categories and suppose this to be so self-evident as not even to require explanation, never mind critical examination. It is equally astonishing that it should recommend the re-making of McGill University along the lines pursued by American affirmative action proponents in the wake of a highly controversial U.S. Supreme Court judgment – a judgment with a terminus ad quem – without so much as acknowledging the existence of the controversy, but more on that in a moment.

5. Measuring Excellence by Diversity

I say again: if the link between a healthy intellectual diversity and biological, religious, and cultural diversity cannot be properly articulated the whole document fails. But let us suppose for a moment that it does not fail; that for us ‘healthy intellectual diversity’ will point to something other or more than what most of us would take it to mean, viz., free debate, governed by rigorous academic standards, about the merits of ideas or lines of research. Let us suppose that at McGill we are going to provide targeted support for biological, religious, and cultural diversity as a formula for achieving intellectual

\[30\] I do not deny that ‘way of life’ can have a bearing on academic excellence, insofar as it touches on physical or mental or moral fitness. Integrity and stamina in each of these areas may well be necessary conditions – though certainly not sufficient conditions – for superior performance in theoretical mathematics, say, or in theology for that matter.

\[31\] The word ‘religion’ remarkably appears only once in the entire document; i.e., in its pro forma place in the list of protected categories. ‘Religious’ and ‘religions’ are words that do not appear at all, leading one to wonder what world – or what university even – the Task Force thought itself to be inhabiting. When it comes to identity markers, religion is even more powerful than sex or race.
diversity and academic excellence, rather than simply expecting the former as a likely by-product of the latter. How then will we agree on such a formula in practice?

Obviously it is impossible to support all groups, even all minority groups or subcultures, equally. Shall we concentrate with SEDE, then, on LGBTQ groups, or perhaps on feminist groups? (In today’s constructionist discourse, ‘diversity’ is often a code word for a very particular kind of constructionism: the kind that is obsessed with gender as a social construct.) But why not focus rather on some more marginalized group or groups? Which ones do we privilege and which ones do we pass over? Are there good reasons for our choices and are we accountable for them? At what point does our exercise of choice amount to an exercise in social engineering?

It is said or implied that we need more of this group and more of that; more will make us better. How much more is not said, however, nor how we will know when enough is enough. When, for example, do we put the brakes on the pursuit of the report’s A-list ‘under-represented minorities’? When we reach the level that exists in the general population? (In that case, we may already have done so in some cases. Is that to be checked with the statisticians?) Or is it the general population that is actually the problem? Is it the university’s task to reflect the trends in the general population or somehow to correct them – and, if so, by what standard?

The Task Force makes no proposal for the use of quotas, either in hirings or in admissions, but some kind of diversity merit system is plainly in view. How it is to work is not at all plain. No formula – no principle even, on which a formula might be based – is offered. Yet it makes the question of a formula inevitable by shifting the ground for ‘the promotion of diversity at McGill’ from philanthropy (which it does not mention) to a concern for fairness, and then ultimately to the service of excellence: ‘The promotion of diversity at McGill can be rooted independently in a commitment to fairness. However, it can also be understood within the context of serving excellence.’

Now let us think about that for a moment. How would we promote diversity fairly? Would we not have to agree on a definition? Would we not have to agree, further, both on the limits of diversity and on the ground rules for the interaction of the recognized elements of diversity? How else could we know whether we were being fair? Things get much trickier yet, however, if we are trying to promote diversity for the sake of excellence. In that case we must make very difficult value judgments, determined by some appropriate standard of excellence. But what standard, and how shall we apply it to the recognized elements of diversity? Does a queer group, say, contribute more or less to excellence than a Buddhist meditation group? How are we to weigh such things in

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32 There is a movement internationally, which has made much progress also at McGill, to redefine gender along the lines preferred by constructionists; as a new Council of Europe convention on eliminating violence against women now has it, gender ‘shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.’ The ‘gender identity’ language that is also advancing at home and abroad belongs to the same ideology.

33 p. 15 (Appendix A)

34 Queers usually regard identity as something constructed and do not lay claim to fixed biological causes as gays generally do. There is no reason, then, to distinguish them from any other ‘way of life’ group.
academic terms? How, in other words, are we to measure the intellectual benefits that accrue to the university from the presence of X over Y, where X and Y represent preference or identity categories rather than individuals? Or is it not really the university that concerns us? Is the university itself, perhaps, to become merely an extension of some preferred ideology, some private standard? Otherwise put, is diversity being employed in the service of excellence, or ‘excellence’ in the service of diversity?

This last question lurks beneath the surface of Grutter v. Bollinger, which saw the University of Michigan Law School awarded a victory (by a five to four margin) that saved, pro tempore, its ‘narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.’ That was the case which, building on Bakke, provided the impetus for the movement represented to us by Dr Clayton-Pedersen of the AACU. Suffice it to say that the dissent (in which Chief Justice Rehnquist joined forces with Thomas, Scalia and Kennedy) provided for the kind of debate there that mutatis mutandis ought to be present here, but is not. Even the majority recommended movement towards a colour-blind system, and indeed struck down the University’s quota system for undergraduate admissions, but that did not prevent affirmative action proponents from declaring themselves vindicated against all counter-claims of discrimination. Nor did any of the serious matters raised in the court’s internal debate give pause to the ideologues of diversity; quite the reverse, they immediately set about creating the program which the Principal’s Task Force at McGill is so enthusiastically recommending to us.

The report does not call for quota systems, of course, which would be too crude and obvious a means of subjecting excellence to diversity. As already stated, it tells us almost nothing about making diversity measurements or about the standards we should use. But it cannot evade the implication that measurements will have to be made, unless it means to say that the university is endlessly capacious or that an excellent university is no particular thing. It cannot evade the implications that measurements will have to be made, so long as it sticks by its claim that diversity is an essential component of excellence, since excellence implies and entails measurement. ‘Diversity scorecards’ of some sort will have to be designed, and are in fact being designed.

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36 See further Peter Wood’s account in chap. 5 of Diversity: The Invention of a Concept (Encounter 2003). It is worth noting that the Grutter decision provoked an amendment in 2006 to Michigan’s constitution, which now insists that any ‘public college or university, community college, or school district shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting’ (italics added).

It should also be observed that the report’s appeal to ‘diversity’ tends to obfuscate the necessary distinction between commitment to fairness and commitment to excellence. It was not fair – indeed it was morally wrong – to exclude Jews from the Faculty Club, for example, so we stopped doing it. But the question of how many Jews there are in the Faculty Club, or of how many Jews it takes to make an excellent department or faculty, is not the kind of question we ask or should ask. It is not more or less fair if there are more or less Jews, or Catholics, or what have you. As for excellence, if Jews happen to excel in the academy, or to excel in a particular faculty or discipline, are we going to redefine excellence in order to make more room for a greater proportion of non-Jews? Conversely, are we going to go looking for Jews? No, we are going to go looking for excellence – using agreed standards of excellence – and leave the diversity question to take care of itself.

I will happily concede to the Task Force (to continue with my own example) that a university with both Jews and Gentiles is a good thing. I will not concede that the university should engage in diversity profiling to try to make a good thing better. I will even concede that internal imbalances of a racial, social or sexual kind can have an impact on academic culture. To offer a different example, we have many classrooms in Arts where the female to male ratio is very high. This sometimes (though not always) bears on the learning atmosphere or even on learning and teaching methods. I myself much prefer a classroom where there is something approximating a gender balance. I even ask my colleagues difficult questions such as ‘Why have men given up on the Arts?’ But I do not propose diversity profiling as a solution to the imbalance. Whether we like it or not, however, the very idea of ‘diversity enhancement’ pushes us in that direction – towards some kind of quota system, formal or informal, albeit one for which no transparent rationale is possible. And that is a formula for disaster.

6. Calculating the Cost

What are some of the costs we will incur along the way to this disaster? Let me point to three or four by way of conclusion.

Obviously, there will be monetary costs. The bill for generating the requested offices and positions, and for enacting the policies or procedures recommended by the Task Force, we may leave to the administration to calculate for us, if it can. Suffice it on that score to state the obvious, namely, that whatever goes into those positions and processes does not go into academic positions or academic work – unless of course we accept the false premise that that this is academic work. Moreover, though the positions may be relatively few and the associated sums easy to calculate, the processes promise to be endless and their costs difficult to predict or contain. That is especially problematic in a time of restraint, but is always problematic for the reason stated.

38 Neither, though, do I accept the answer that we can’t do anything about it because we can only take what the schools and colleges send us? Who, after all, sends them the teachers who shape their culture?
More importantly, there will be costs to the integrity of our academic infrastructure. Departments, which concentrate on disciplinary enterprises, create ‘silos’ that are more difficult to penetrate with diversity and equity concerns. What is wanted, in place of ‘the entrenched disciplinary structure’ we now have, is a more open and flexible structure ‘that enables collaboration and movement outside of the confines of disciplinary limitations.’

McGill will require some reorganization, then, along lines determined by the new ideology. In this reorganization, institutes will come in handy; institutes, we are told, ‘should not have to compete for resources with departments.’

Curricula, too, must be revamped:

Generally speaking, intellectual diversity can function as a [new] frame for the curriculum, which would allow gender, age, sexuality, Aboriginal, and Francophone issues to more easily find expression in various programs. Intellectual diversity within the curriculum can also make room for academic pursuits that involve a dimension of community engagement.

Think ‘solving intractable social problems’ through sustained support programs on campus and through partnership with communities off campus. In other words, think social activism as a new mark of excellence, as on certain other campuses that discretion forbids me to name. Think making McGill mediocre.

No less important will be the cost to collegiality – not to speak of new torments for the administration – once identity politics takes over the university. Even now, thanks to the Task Force, there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. Or rather, to employ Dr Clayton-Pedersen’s curious choice of metaphor, there is a ‘choir’ that favours the changes recommended by the Task Force and then there are the ‘traditionalists’, people like me ‘who worry that the required changes may bring about the dilution of McGill’s standards of excellence.’ Clayton-Pedersen warns the Task Force to expect resistance from the latter, who will require some accommodation in the short term. She suggests that this accommodation take the form of a dialogue – a dialogue designed to swell the ranks of the choir, which must not be left preaching to itself, and to diminish the ranks of the dissonant traditionalists until there is common ownership of the new agenda.

That seems, if I may say so, a strangely patronizing approach to diversity, since this ‘dialogue’ plainly aims at conversion where possible and very politely hints at

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39 p. 16 (Appendix A). One thinks, for example, of the new Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, which was well represented on the Task Force.

40 p. 18 (Appendix A)

41 p. 34 (Appendix E); cf. p. 24 (Appendix B): ‘It not enough that McGill recruit students from traditionally underrepresented groups without establishing deep and sustained programming to support them throughout their time at the University.’

42 Be warned: Prayer rooms and blood banks are but the beginning of birth pangs.

43 p. 30 (Appendix C). But this whole exercise (see n. 10 above) seems to involve the choir doing its own preaching; first to itself, then to us.
marginalization where necessary. Everyone, apparently, is to learn to sing off the new diversity song sheet. As for those who support a view of diversity that differs significantly from the account of Clayton-Pedersen and company, well, they are – in every other respect – left out of account. But I see no reason to institutionalize her view rather than mine, say. I see no reason why McGill should rig up a system of carrots and sticks to encourage her view and discourage mine. It seems to me that the university is a place for this sort of thing to be debated, not dictated and enforced.

Most important of all, of course, is the cost to the university’s integrity qua university, about which I have already said enough perhaps. Certainly McGill did not achieve the excellence it has by focusing on ‘social equity and diversity’ questions; nor is there any actual evidence in the report to suggest that such a focus will help McGill maintain excellence. On the contrary, proceeding with the revolution it proposes will change McGill root and branch, not by achieving a richer and more harmonious environment for academic excellence, but rather by subverting its very nature as an academic community. As Peter Wood (sometime associate provost at Boston University) put it several years ago, ‘diversity in higher education is a lesson in disappointment’.

We are given to understand that Task Force members ‘are committed to applying and promoting the principals [sic] behind this document in their various roles at McGill and to encourage and support diversity, to look at excellence from a broad perspective, and to connect – when possible – with the communities outside McGill.’ We can only hope not, since its principles and assumptions and procedures are incompatible with those that made McGill the preeminent kind of university it is. Perhaps we may yet hope, however, for the ‘significant institutional self-reflection’ it professes to desire, in which might figure the question as to how McGill came to produce a report so lacking in excellence.

44 Including, ominously, those who sit on the Committee on Staff Grievances and Disciplinary Procedure.
45 Clayton-Pedersen points out that traditionalists ‘may be sympathetic to the cause of an enhanced level of diversity’, and that indeed is true. I myself am the kind of ‘traditionalist’ who believes in diversity and even offers a theoretical account thereof – one with roots as deep at least as the second century and more likely, I dare say, to survive the twenty-first – but I do not understand diversity as she does.
46 See further the 2010 Newman Lecture, ‘The (Lost) Idea of the University’ (forthcoming in Nova et Venera), in which I have tried to articulate something of my own view of the university.
47 Indeed, the report makes no more than a passing allusion to supportive studies – studies not even named, much less critically examined. The sole source of access to these studies that it provides is ‘Making Excellence Inclusive’.
48 Diversity, p. 254. Moreover, it is ‘a mischievous ideology that has far too long enjoyed exemption from serious intellectual critique’ (ibid. 326). That it is recommended to McGill with this exemption intact is a disgrace.
49 p. 29 (Appendix B), following Clayton-Pedersen.