



Conservative 'Academic Bill of Rights' Limits "Controversial Matter" in Classroom

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Members of the Florida State legislature heard testimony Tuesday about the so-called "academic freedom" bill that would develop a statewide "bill of rights" for faculty to follow in the interest of delivering what they call a "fair and balanced" curriculum. We host a debate between the Florida legislator who introduced the bill and the President of the Faculty Union of University of South Florida. [includes rush transcript]

Yesterday members of the Florida State legislature heard testimony about the so-called "academic freedom" bill or HB 837. The bill would develop a statewide "bill of rights" for faculty to follow in the interest of delivering a "fair and balanced" curriculum. The bill is a product of an academic bill of rights written by David Horowitz, founder of the conservative think tank, Students for Academic Freedom.

The group has been campaigning for state and federal legislation that adopts the bill. The website for Students for Academic Freedom features a template for such legislation, which can be copied by any interested state legislator. There are similar bills pending in California, Pennsylvania and Georgia.

- [Rep. Dennis Baxley](#), Republican Florida state representative from Ocala.
- **Roy Weatherford**, a professor of philosophy at [University of South Florida](#). He is also the President of the Faculty Union of University of South Florida.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We're joined on the telephone by State Representative Dennis Baxley, and we're joined in our studio by Roy Weatherford, Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida, also President of the Faculty Union of University of

South Florida. Can you talk, State Representative Baxley, about why you have introduced this bill?

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: Thank you very much. I first of all want to just express my admiration and appreciation for Professor Weatherford and the manner in which he presented his views yesterday in committee. If all of our professors handled themselves the way he does, this bill would never exist. I introduced this legislation because in my own experience as a student, and many of the people that I meet, I have found that there are a lot of people who, if they are of conservative mainline views, they are many times persecuted on campuses. This is not any fault of any individual. It is simply that we have allowed over time for leftists to become centered at our campuses, and we have lost the diversity of ideology in the campus environment that we always strove for historically. My effort is simply to bring universities to the table, give them a guidance piece in legislation. This legislation has no causative action in it. It doesn't hire anybody. It doesn't fire anybody. It doesn't set up any specific grievance procedures. It simply sets a standard for academic freedom that it not just exist for the professor, but for everyone on that campus.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Professor Weatherford, what is your response, what is your concern about the bill?

ROY WEATHERFORD: Well, there are three parts of the bill that are of particular concern to the professoriat. I should mention that I am not merely speaking for the University of South Florida faculty. Throughout this legislative session, I am acting as the higher education director of the Florida Education Association, representing 120,000 education employees in Florida. And I am therefore speaking for the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, our affiliates, and the American Association of University Professors has also asked me to represent their views. So, for the first time ever, the professoriat is speaking with one voice, and we are unanimously against the bill. The three things that it does that we think are not wise. First of all, it specifies that faculty may not introduce controversial subjects when they're inappropriate, but it provides no mechanism or means for determining who gets to say what is controversial. Somebody, evidently, will have the right to tell us what we cannot say in our classroom, and that strikes at the very root of academic freedom. Secondly, it says that students have the right to expect that alternative views will be presented. One of the examples that Representative Baxley has used in discussing his bill is that it would be appropriate in a biology class or in a science class, for intelligent design to be taught whenever the theory of evolution is being taught. Well, first of all, that again requires faculty to teach something that they do not think is scientifically legitimate or should be in the course, and secondly, there are far more alternatives than just one. Lysenkoism in the old Soviet Union was the orthodox form of biology; would we be required to teach that as well? Would our business colleges have to teach Marxism as a legitimate business theory? There are many alternatives, not just one or two. And finally, it says that students have a right to expect these things, which presumably means that they would have the right to sue to have the rights enforced, which the bill analysis says would cost the people of Florida \$4.2 million, and my wife says would be a real boon to the trial lawyers of our state.

AMY GOODMAN: State Representative Baxley, your response.

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: Yes. I'd be happy to respond to that. First of all, the whole idea of intelligent design being taught is never something that I have advocated. I merely illustrated that I went on an anthropology class as a student and was dogmatically told that evolution is a fact. There's no missing link. I don't even want to hear anything about creation or intelligent design. And if you don't like any of that, there's the door. That kind of dogmatism is what I was addressing, not that they needed to teach -- they can teach whatever they want to teach, but what the bill requires is that you give different schools of thought and not just the dogma of an individual professor. What we're trying to achieve --

AMY GOODMAN: Creationism and evolution.

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: I'm sorry, you run over me, but you don't run over my opponent while he elaborates on and on. So --

AMY GOODMAN: No, no, no. I'm just trying to clarify. No, no, no, I was just trying to clarify, so you were saying in that point, because some people might not know that term intelligent design. So, you are saying that you want creationism and evolution taught in the classroom.

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: Not at all. I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is I don't want a dogmatic professor saying don't bring up any other subject. You take what I give you, and if you don't like what I'm giving you, there's the door. That's the dogmatic attitude of the professor is what I'm addressing.

AMY GOODMAN: Go on. His other concerns.

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: His other concerns, as far as lawsuits -- do you realize millions of dollars that our universities spend training people in diversity? This would be a minor drop in the bucket to what these universities spend on other issues, and I think that freedom of speech and freedom of shared ideas and freedom of -- academic freedom for everyone, not just the dogmatic professor, is worthy of some investment, and if they're doing that much persecution, that it would create that many cases, then we need this law far more than I thought we did. I thought it was very narrow niches that this occurred in.

AMY GOODMAN: Professor Weatherford.

ROY WEATHERFORD: First, I'd like to apologize to Representative Baxley, if he was not the one that used the example. I was not present at the first hearing, and I was told that that was the way the bill was presented. And while I'm at it, I would like to say that Representative Baxley has been very courteous and forthcoming with respect to our opposition and distributed our documents from the NEA and AFT and AAUP to his committee members. So, this is not personal with us. We just have a difference of opinion about the way things should be done.

REP. DENNIS BAXLEY: Well, and I would -- I would concur with the professor that there are different ways to approach this, and the ultimate outcome of this may, by bringing this forward -- as a legislator, this is the way I bring ideas forward. And a more proper resolution before we get to the end of this may be a commitment from the universities to address diversity of ideology, to address these areas of oppression, and an awareness that -- of making students aware that they have a way to address these

things. But I simply want to challenge the fact that some professors use the great book, and their referrals for doctorate programs and also advancement and application to their faculties to narrow the ideology to a point that we're losing diversity of ideology on our campuses.

ROY WEATHERFORD: And I would agree with Representative Baxley that the kinds of things that he describes are inappropriate, if and when they do occur, and indeed, given human fallibility, they do occur from time to time. On the other hand, I think in many respects, this bill is a solution in search of a problem, because we don't have serious widespread complaints from students, and we do have grievance mechanisms already in place to deal with those concerns.

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