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Baxley's bill is hardly conservative

By Liam Julian

OFF CAMPUS

Sometimes these days, it's rather difficult to know what being a conservative actually means.

I was always under the impression that conservatives detested overweening government interference in people's lives and thoughts, and that they stalwartly opposed the litigation culture that seems to be exploding in our society.

But I guess I was wrong.

For Rep. Dennis Baxley of Ocala, the sponsor of House Bill 837, being a conservative seems to mean just the opposite.

HB 837's intent is to protect conservative university students from having their grades or classroom treatment unfairly influenced by liberal professors. It contends that right-wing students on campus are forced to choke down their thoughts for fear of academic oppression by left-minded instructors.

To hear Baxley tell it, this bill couldn't be more necessary. During discussion of the bill, he spoke of "niches of totalitarianism" on college campuses where leftist "dictators" rule with impunity.

Campuses are certainly liberal places, but totalitarianism? This is glaring hyperbole at its finest.

HB 837 addresses a problem that may not even exist. As an unabashed conservative at FSU, and as a visible columnist who has written conservative pieces in the student newspaper for more than two years, I can honestly say that I feel completely untrammelled and unpersecuted by my supposedly socialist surroundings.

But I can't speak for all students, and it seems that some conservatives at FSU are a bit more sensitive to criticism than am I.

Matthew Farrar, a 19-year old FSU student, recently told the House Education Council that after soliciting the College Republicans for instances of discrimination by liberal professors, he had received almost a dozen e-mail replies.

I would guess, however, that if I asked the FSU College Democrats to give me some examples of discrimination by conservative faculty, I would receive a similarly sizable response.

Just last week, the FSU student newspaper reported that Nadine Smith, executive director of

Equality Florida, told a campus gathering that colleges are being overtaken by conservative thought, and that right-wingers are trying to end the university's open exchange of ideas and knowledge.

Everyone believes that the other side is out to get them. Does Florida really need to pass a bill on the basis of such vague and limited evidence that stifles professors' classroom autonomy and threatens to bring about more costly lawsuits?

Do we really need the government regulating (because that's what this bill essentially does) the academic exchange on campuses?

In the midst of all this, it seems almost too obvious to point out that sometimes it's OK just to sit in class and be quiet. I can remember many instances where I bit my tongue as my professors made snide and unfair comments about President Bush or presented liberal, revisionist history as fact.

But every moment is not the moment to be a hero. Sometimes it's far better to content oneself by thinking, "This professor doesn't have a clue and couldn't be any less classy. I don't want to sink to that level."

And for every instance where my teachers have embarrassed themselves with inappropriate or incorrect political observations, I can recollect three times as many classroom situations where good, spirited academic debate was nurtured and enjoyed by the students and the professor.

Individual cases of discrimination can be taken up with individual university administrations on individual bases. There is no justification to make a mountain out of a molehill and pass a poorly conceived bill that causes far more problems than it could ever hope to rectify.

Gov. Jeb Bush remained true to his conservative philosophy when he told reporters that he would be unlikely to sign HB 837 if it came to his desk. Those Republican representatives who have already voted for the bill would do well to follow Bush's lead and to re-evaluate their support for Baxley's proposal.

There's just nothing conservative about the government forcing college professors to diversify their teachings. The Republicans who support HB 837 or its Senate companion, SB 2126, betray a profound misunderstanding of conservative principles.

Conservatives on campus can take care of themselves without the aid of legislators, lawyers or judges. Ignorant ideas and ignorant people generally don't have long shelf lives. They thrive, however, when outsiders try to censor or regulate them (see Ward Churchill).

HB 837 illustrates bad thinking. Representatives should vote against it and then get back to work making decisions in areas where government intervention is truly needed.

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