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Epilogue: The Remarkable Response to the Release of the *Chilly Climate Report*

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This essay was written several years after the Chilly Climate Report was completed as a retrospective summary of the highly volatile and contentious debate that was occasioned by the release of the Report. It is based on our files of news clippings, notes, and recollections of the reactions of colleagues, senior administrators, the media, and various other interested parties.

The essay is accompanied here by two discussions written at the time of the events described (Appendices A and B). Appendix A was published in the Western student newspaper, The Gazette, shortly after the Report was made public. Appendix B, circulated informally several weeks later, was a response to emerging criticisms which we felt misunderstood or misrepresented what we had attempted to do in the Report. As difficult and unexpected as the public debate proved to be, it had several constructive outcomes which are described in the conclusion to this discussion.

— Eds.

The decision to compile the *Chilly Climate Report*, as with the *Backhouse Report*, was taken in response to the awarding of the Employment Equity Award to the University of Western Ontario in 1986. Four of us — Constance Backhouse, Roma Harris, Gillian Michell, and Alison Wylie — believed this award to be seriously misplaced and felt that it was important to make continuing attempts to register our concerns. We decided to release the findings of our research into current conditions at the University on 12 November 1989, the third anniversary of the receipt of the award. None of us anticipated the furore that would erupt in its wake.

Word was out in many quarters that the *Chilly Climate Report* was being prepared. It was discussed openly at meetings of Western's Caucus on Women's Issues (the Women's Caucus), whose membership included senior administrators and members of the recently struck President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity. We had discussed the *Report* with the women we interviewed and many other interested women and men in our departments. Not surprisingly, Wendy McCann, the reporter assigned to cover University affairs for the local newspaper, *The London Free Press*, had also learned of our research some months earlier from her contacts on campus. During an interview with Constance Backhouse about initiatives to reduce sexism at the law school, McCann had asked us to contact her when the *Report* was to be released.

In light of this media interest and the general awareness that the *Report* was imminent, we made efforts to contact members of the administration in advance of releasing the report. Each of us informed the administrative heads of our own units. Alison Wylie also made individual calls to those we thought were most likely to be called upon for a response by the media, including

- the Provost and Vice-President (Academic),
- the Associate Vice-President (Academic Affairs),
- the Dean of Arts,
- the Employment Equity Officer,
- the Chair of the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity, and
- the Executive of Western's Caucus on Women's Issues (the Women's Caucus).

In all cases the response she received was cordial, ranging from general interest to enthusiasm. Further, after a long and detailed discussion of the genesis and content of the report, the Provost — who seemed most likely to be called on for comment if the *Report* generated public interest — made a point of calling Wylie back to ask if she would provide him with written notes summarizing the various points she had made in their telephone conversation. He thought it might be helpful to have these ready to hand as a basis for constructive response to any calls that might come in from interested reporters. Wylie took that opportunity to write up several pages of discussion of the *Report*, which she delivered to the Provost's office on 7 November, early in the week the *Report* was released (these notes follow as Appendix A).

On Thursday, 9 November 1989, we hand delivered copies of the *Report* to members of the senior administration — the President, the Provost, and the Associate Vice-President (Academic Affairs), as well as to the Deans of

the Schools and Faculties whose members we had interviewed. Advance copies were similarly provided to the President of the Faculty Association, the Chair of the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity, and all of the women interviewed for the *Report*. A copy would also be placed on reserve at the D.B. Weldon Library, Western's main library, on Monday, 13 November, after the University officials had had an opportunity to digest the *Report*.

On Friday evening we contacted Wendy McCann of *The London Free Press*, as she had requested, to inform her that the *Report* was at last released. She drove over to one of our homes to obtain a copy and quickly scheduled a weekend interview with the three authors who were in town at the time. On Saturday morning at the York Street office of *The London Free Press*, McCann grilled us for about an hour and a half on the particulars of our study and our recommendations for change. She was a skilful interviewer who asked astute questions and followed our lines of argument with care. She informed us that she would be contacting representatives of the University for comment before releasing the article in Monday's paper.

We were pleased by McCann's obvious interest in the story, since there had been some question in our minds about whether the *Report* would attract any public attention at all. For the past several months, the press had been carrying stories of blatant and overt incidents of sexism and sexual harassment uncovered at various Canadian universities, including Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Calgary, Queen's University, the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, and even at Western.¹ But many of the kinds of experiences our report recounted seemed very subtle to us, and others seemed meaningful only within the rarefied confines of academic life. Indeed, we thought of the study as primarily an internal document at Western, hardly the stuff of national news.

Even closer to home we had limited hopes of news interest. In late September, Alison Wylie had mentioned to a reporter for the *Western News*, the official newspaper published by the University, that the *Report* was forthcoming and asked if he would like to receive a copy. The reporter said we could send him one if we wanted but intimated that coverage was unlikely unless it somehow generated controversy, since it was not an official university report—something of a “don't-call-us-we'll-call-you” response. This lack of interest did not particularly surprise us. After all, what the *Report* did was simply to document *at Western* practices and patterns that had been widely reported and discussed since at least 1983 across a very broad range of universities and colleges in North America.²

So naive were we about the potentially explosive media interest that, with one exception, we made no effort to ensure that other media represent-

atives received particulars of the *Report*. George Clark, the news director at London's local television station, CFPL-TV, had expressed a continuing interest in the problems of women faculty at Western after the release of the *Backhouse Report*. As a matter of courtesy, Constance Backhouse informed him that weekend of the new study, and he arranged for two of us to do a segment on the early-morning news program *FYI*, on Monday, 13 November.

Throughout the weekend we awaited the response to the *Report* with mixed feelings and some trepidation. We were surprised and pleased by the level of interest exhibited by the *Free Press* and CFPL-TV. From the outset we had been committed to making this report available to any who might take an interest in it. The attention of the local media, while somewhat unanticipated, would ensure that our message of concern would get out.

We also wondered what the official response of the University would be. Obviously, the news we bore was not good, but the University had already acknowledged that things needed to be changed when it had established the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity. Further, the stories we had to tell were exactly the kind of information that the Committee needed to collect on a much larger scale in order to know how to develop appropriate strategies for achieving its goals. What we hoped to hear from the senior administrators was twofold: an expression of shock and concern at the range and quality of experiences we had uncovered, and statements about the University's commitment to change. We were afraid that the more likely response would be a routine "yes-thank-you-we've-referred-it-to-our-Employment-Equity-Committee," after which our report would disappear from public view without a ripple. This was essentially what had happened when the *Backhouse Report* was released, and we thought it all too likely that it would happen again.

Bright and early Monday morning, Roma Harris and Constance Backhouse reported to the headquarters of CFPL-TV. They were jointly interviewed by an amiable morning host for an 8:00 a.m. slot on London's *FYI* news program. The 15-minute segment, broadcast live, seemed relatively innocuous, as the two authors of the *Report* and the talk-show host chatted away about some of the difficulties confronting faculty women.

Monday morning's edition of *The London Free Press*, however, came as something more of a surprise. What we had thought was a subtle and reasonably low-key report seemed to transform itself, under the influence of journalism's eye for the dramatic, into potentially sensational copy. On page one of the London section, under the title "UWO Sexism Report," was the headline "One Faculty Rated Brutal and Vicious." The article led off with this statement: "A new report says sexism is 'rampant' at the University of Western Ontario and a female professor compares working in her fac-

ulty to 'surviving a military boot camp.'" Six of the complaints we had heard from interviewees were cited in a box, *USA Today*-style. Other headlines and highlighted items followed:

- "The report says unwelcome 'sexual attention and physical molestation by colleagues' are common";
- "SEXISM: Women called dolly, broad, love"; and
- "Bum patting."³

Unfortunately, it was never made clear in the article that these statements about women's experiences at the University were quotations from the statements of individual women we had interviewed, rather than broad conclusions drawn by the authors of the *Report*. We had been very careful about making any generalizations at all in the *Report*. This was intended to be an initial attempt to document the experiences of some women at Western, not a sweepingly definitive study. Making a distinction between statements from individual women and broad generalizations was crucial to us, even if it was not essential to the requirements of journalism.

With some relief, we noted that the initial press reaction of Western's Provost was much as we had expected. In the same article, he cited the attempts Western had already made to address problems of sexism, such as the sexual harassment policy, and stated that the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity would "consider the report." But the Provost claimed, in addition, that he was "powerless" to investigate the complaints because our interviewees had "chosen to go unnamed." This we found strange, given how carefully we had explained the need for anonymity in the *Report*, not only as normal practice in social science research but also, more specifically, in light of the risk of retribution which was all too likely in the climate we were describing.

We each reported to our offices on campus that morning with some anxiety, concerned about the response awaiting us and worried about what newspaper readers, especially within the University community, would make of the story. As the day wore on, it became clear that other news media had picked up the story as a hot topic. A television crew from nearby Kitchener, Ontario, dashed out to interview one of the authors on site. Phone call after phone call began flooding into each of our offices from radio stations urgently requesting statements for airing. Reporters from three separate newspapers demanded follow-up interviews.

Whether it was owing to the mounting media coverage, or the dramatic *Free Press* lead article, or whether it was inevitable from the outset, things were beginning to unravel at the administration building. By late afternoon, television broadcasts revealed an angry and increasingly vehement Western Provost insisting that the *Report* was overblown and unduly critical. His

statement for next morning's *Free Press*, in an unusual twist of logic, blamed our study for nullifying the steps the University had taken to combat sexism. "[I]t probably set the issue back five years," he complained, disclosing only too clearly that he understood progress to be a matter of perception rather than reality. He also attacked the credibility of the interviewees: "It's pretty easy to say whatever you want when you hide behind the cloak of anonymity."⁴

Free Press columnist Morris Dalla Costa reviewed the *Report* in his 14 November column, and deplored the broadness of the findings: "[I]t's a horrendous indictment of every male working in the seven faculties and six departments, regardless of their feelings and support of equality. Just as the terms bimbo, babe and broad tar every woman, the report, full of nameless faces, tars every male professor."⁵

In our opinion, the President's response was also defensive. The same edition of the *Free Press* quoted him: "The University of Western Ontario isn't a battleground of sexism and a report suggesting women teachers are under siege 'dramatically overstates the issue,' ... 'I don't think conditions are as dismal as they are portrayed in this study.'" The President also continued to focus on the matter of anonymity. Questioning the survey results "because the women asked to remain anonymous," he grumbled: "it does leave people open to make any old statement they want."⁶

None of us had ever intended our report to be taken as the basis for drawing final and conclusive generalizations about the University as a whole. In fact, we were careful to represent the work we did as a small pilot study demonstrating that the kind of "climate" problems already well documented in North American universities were to be found at our own university. We hoped and expected that this would give the impetus for a more systematic assessment by University officials. Data gathering on an extensive scale would be one of the first components of this work, a project which we had not been able to undertake as four individuals.

Furthermore, we were astonished by the attack on our decision to keep the names of our interviewees confidential. The women we interviewed had requested anonymity not just out of fear of reprisals but because no constructive purpose would be served by pointing fingers at individual faculties or colleagues. Our objective was not to seek redress for individual cases, but to give voice to a problem that the University needed to address in a broader, institutional manner. In addition, most social scientists and research-granting agencies commonly insist that anonymity be maintained for individuals who participate in their surveys. As Wylie later observed in a response to criticisms of the *Report*: "Subjects are routinely assured that research materials identifying them will be kept under lock and key, and destroyed after a specified period of time; they are guaranteed that the data

resulting from studies in which they participate will be published in aggregate form so [individuals] are not identifiable and, in the case of research which focuses closely on particular individuals, pseudonyms are typically used and any identifying details carefully disguised."⁷ Given the sensitive nature of the issues we were addressing, it would seem that any survey or set of interviews, pilot or wide scale, should make the protection of subjects' identity a particularly high priority. But whatever the circumstances, "if the anonymity of research subjects was . . . ground for dismissing the credibility of social scientific research, very little would survive scrutiny."⁸

What was there about the anonymity of participants in our study which had attracted such censure? It seemed as if our detractors were singling out our report and applying special standards that would not have been demanded of other research. Were they implying that the authors had "made it all up"? The President's aspersions on the likely credibility of our sources sounded to us suspiciously reminiscent of the time-worn refrain that women cannot be trusted to tell the truth—a dangerous and unsubstantiated mythology that has haunted generations of rape victims and battered women.

It was also difficult to know exactly what the President meant by his claim that our report dramatically overstated the issue. Was he denying our interviewees' individual stories (since these were the substance of the *Report*)? In fact, as Wylie later observed,

we took special care to ensure the accuracy of all claims [in the *Report*]. As we completed our final draft, we contacted each woman we had interviewed, . . . outlined the context in which her remarks were reported, and asked her to review all the statements attributed to her. . . . Frequently interviewees requested that certain details be excised because they were too readily identifiable, but just as frequently they added material to convey more completely and accurately the nature of the difficulties they faced. We incorporated all the revisions suggested. It is a profound insult not just to [the authors], but to the 35 women interviewed, that public critics of the *Report* seemed to find the experiences . . . describ[ed] so implausible that . . . they questioned the integrity of the accounts [on the ground of anonymity].⁹

Or was the President angered that our survey had included only 35 women? The only generalization that our research supported—and the only one that we made—was that a number of women (approaching 10% of the female faculty) had experiences at Western that diminished them as women and academics, making for a chilly work climate. Was the President claiming that he knew the proportion to be different from this on the basis of some evidence he had available to him? He mentioned no such evidence. Constance Backhouse, when asked to respond in another 14 November newspaper article, called attention to this omission. *Free Press* reporter

Richard Hoffman advised that Backhouse had "urged Western to do its own study if officials find it hard to accept the results of her survey."¹⁰

Responding to the critique of anonymity, Backhouse placed the responsibility for women's fears of retaliation squarely on the university community: "[T]he women's refusal to be named suggests that despite recent strides there is still an environment of intimidation that keeps women from coming forward. The university could do a lot better than it is doing." Reporter Hoffman added that Backhouse thought it a "travesty" that the Ontario government had given the University an award for its employment equity program.¹¹

By late Thursday afternoon, 16 November 1989, things had become increasingly unpleasant. The President was scheduled to preside over a meeting of the Senate, the governing academic body for the University. Much to their bewilderment, members of the Senate arrived to find that the President had issued press notices inviting the media to attend. In front of the assembled throng of faculty, administrators, students, staff, reporters, and camera crews, he lambasted the four authors of the *Chilly Climate Report* for what he characterized as their "recently staged media events." He termed this "effort to debase the achievements of our employees" as "offensive." The President closed with a recital from a prepared text:

I particularly regret, on behalf of all those women and men who have worked so hard over the last fifteen years to address these sensitive issues, that a report was released at the end of last week for purposes of a media event. It does not help the causes for which so many people have worked to release to the media an unsystematic selection of perceptions formulated into unproven, untestable, and unverifiable complaints and allegations.

Let me be very clear. If there are perceptions of unjust and unequal treatment the University must address them, and do so through all of the mechanisms currently in place. Again, I regret that we have not been allowed to do so in the current circumstances.¹²

The President's statement illustrated only too poignantly how little he understood the contents of the *Chilly Climate Report*. The kinds of experiences we were reporting, by and large, were not amenable to correction under the sexual harassment policy and procedures. No mechanisms for redress of "gender harassment" of a more general sort were in place. Even where the issues seemed quite clear cut — as in the case of gender inequities in starting salaries, in provisions for leave to complete graduate training, and in administrative and teaching assignments — the administrators with the authority to rectify the problems were often those responsible for creating them. The women we spoke to were frequently quite explicit that their difficulties had been compounded by the fact that there was nowhere to turn. Very often, too, the elements that create a chilly climate are not easily

identifiable, blatant, concrete acts, but more subtle ones that cause cumulative damage. As one interviewee pleaded: "Tell me, how can I fight a wisp of fog?"¹³

While many of the instances we cited might have fallen under the responsibility of the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity, at that point the Committee had barely begun its work and was still collecting data. In fact, the Chair of that Committee, Dr. Carol Agòcs, announced that she was pleased to have our report as a resource. As she said to the *Western News*, the *Report* provided "subjective information that raw numbers cannot convey." A noted Canadian scholar in the area of employment equity, Agòcs also described the *Report* as the only work available "that summarizes the experience of women faculty [in Canada] in recent times."

As for the President's charges that we had released the *Report* only to "stage" a "media event," this would have been laughable if things had not become so strained by this point. The President's allegations seemed to imply, at the very least, some element of surprise. Was he suggesting that we had given the media our report before those concerned or affected by it had received it? In fact, the administration had been informed that the *Report* would be available two weeks before it was released, and senior Western administrators received advance copies well before any release to the media.

Was he implying that Western officials were caught off guard by the media interest? As it turned out, the authors of the *Report* learned that Western administrators had actually been forewarned, by a circuitous and largely accidental series of connections, that *The London Free Press* university affairs reporter knew that the *Report* was soon to be released.

The President's comments that our primary goal in releasing the study to members of the media was publicly to discredit and embarrass the University was, in our opinion, extremely irresponsible. The problem, as our report proved only too clearly, was that most victims of sexism are too fearful of retribution to speak out about their situations. A university, which by definition should be dedicated to expanding knowledge about social conditions, ought to welcome previously undisclosed and new sources of information. In our view, the reaction of Western officials amounted to an attempt to squelch any public criticism of themselves, oblivious to the harm they might do to women faculty members who were trying to effect institutional change. They also seemed unwilling to recognize the impact of their actions upon women who might consider bringing forward complaints in the future. "At rock bottom," as Constance Backhouse would state to *The London Free Press*, "we're talking about women's freedom of speech."¹⁴

The President's complaint of a "staged media event" also implied some large and well-organized press conference, with systematic, wide-ranging

press releases. One of the ironies, as one of us mused later, was that if we had truly wanted to attract media attention, or to discredit the University, we certainly would have gone about it differently. We made no overtures apart from the ones listed above; we called no radio stations, no Toronto or national newspapers, no wire services, no press conference.

The *Report* came to public notice in a somewhat unplanned way. As Wylie put it in her response to critics: "It [was] a credit to the energy and attentiveness of local London reporters, not to us, that there was news of the *Report* so soon after it was circulated."¹⁵ Now and again, when we were most disheartened by the frenzied hostility of the administration's response, we jokingly assured one another that we could certainly have created a better "media event" than the haphazard coverage the story initially generated if such had been our intention. It was surely an insult that the President believed this was the best we could do! Certainly there were any number of high-profile reporters we could have contacted, but this was neither our goal nor our expectation. In fact, we had never anticipated the depth or breadth of news coverage our report would generate. And our first assumptions may not have been wildly off the mark. An assignments editor at the *Free Press* subsequently told us that she had not expected the story to run for more than a day. Nor would it have, she added, if the administration had not been so belligerent in attacking the *Report* and its authors.

The single greatest irony was that the media event which did unfold was largely created by the Western administrators who invited television crews and reporters to attend the Senate meeting. It remains, as Wylie observed, "a mystery to us why [at first contact with the media] the President and the Provost did not simply state that they were aware of the problems we describe[d], that [these problems] are generic to universities in North America, and that Western was actively addressing them."¹⁶ With such a response, there would have been no "media event." By contrast, however, the President not only called a press conference to discuss the *Report*, but opened it by denouncing our report as a "staged media event." Not surprisingly, the press eagerly seized on the explosive story of a university president lashing out at four female faculty members. Western's student newspaper, *The Gazette*, described the President as having "minced few words" in an article titled "[President] Slams Report." It also reported the Provost's depiction of the study as "innuendo," along with his reiteration of concern that it could only "counter the process it pretends to support."¹⁷ In the free-for-all that followed the close of the Senate meeting that Thursday afternoon, the President became even more condemnatory. Responding to reporters' questions, he claimed that he refused to take seriously a report that made anonymous allegations, and that he would not order an investigation to see if such conditions really existed. He seemed to imply that evidence of discriminatory

treatment could only be voiced within the confines of formal sexual harassment complaint procedures, where named individuals came forward to charge their alleged abusers. Those who purported to study the problems in a larger sense were acting not as legitimate academic researchers, but as some sort of special-interest lobby group. Furthermore, the President seemed to be attacking such wider studies as inherently malicious. He capped off the interview with the extraordinary statement: "It's almost a Joe McCarthy type of research we're doing here."¹⁸

J.R. McCarthy, a rabidly right-wing United States Senator, achieved historical notoriety in the 1950s Cold War era when he spearheaded a campaign to hunt down suspected Communists and rout them from all positions of power and influence. His was a crusade that relied upon enormous institutional coercion to force individuals to identify suspected Communist sympathizers. Geoffrey Rans, a faculty member of the Department of English, was one of the few men within the Western community who took public exception to the President's remarks. Turning the tables on the President in a letter to the editor published in *Western News* on 7 December, he argued that the President was more deserving of the McCarthy appellation:

If anything [the President's statement] is exactly what Joe McCarthy did; [the President] holds up a report which few in the room had read and was not included in the Senators' documentation for the meeting, and delivers an ex cathedra judgment upon it. The largely male Senate held its collective tongue. Not a sound. Not one senator had the heart to question this act of demagoguery.¹⁹

We were terribly dismayed by the escalating hostility of the University officials. The *Free Press* describes Roma Harris' response:

Roma Harris, a library science professor who helped write the report, said [the President] should recognize that the women asked to be anonymous because they're afraid of what would happen to them if they were identified. She said [the President's] reaction shows they were probably right in expecting they'd "get dumped on for naming the problem."²⁰

Despite the President's vilification, Gillian Michell tried to continue to maintain a positive perspective. Speaking to reporters from the *Western News*, Michell emphasized that all the authors remained "committed to Western": "It's a good university overall, but there are some things which we must work at to make it a better place to work, especially for women," she insisted.²¹

None of us had even remotely anticipated being labelled "McCarthy-like" for our attempts to make visible the barriers to women's equality within the University. To be called such in the press by the President of the University was frightening in the extreme. Reached for comment late in the day

on 16 November, at a conference for sexual harassment officers in Windsor, Ontario, where she was speaking, Constance Backhouse was startled and angered by the inflammatory characterization. As she told *Free Press* reporter, Wendy McCann, the contrast between the vehemently critical treatment of the four authors of the *Chilly Climate Report* and the kid-glove handling of Western Psychology Professor J. Philippe Rushton, was very revealing.²² That contrast was remarked on by many observers and is worth further comment.

In January 1989, Rushton had delivered a paper to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in San Francisco. In this remarkable document, Rushton purported to rank "Orientals," Whites, and Blacks in descending order in terms of intelligence, sexual restraint, and respect for the law. Rushton's theory ignited an incendiary debate, enraging academics and the public alike, and landing him international headlines and widespread publicity on such pop-culture television shows as *Geraldo*.

In a response to Rushton's work closer to home, a racially diverse group of Western students formed the Academic Coalition for Equality to call for a boycott of Rushton's classes, claiming that a man who produced such "research" was incapable of treating students of different races equally. The University's student newspaper, *The Gazette*, backed their call, citing the numerous professors and scientists who had denounced Rushton's research in an editorial headlined "Rushton Not Fit to Teach."²³ Forced by 10 days of media barrage to issue an institutional statement, the President repudiated racism but explicitly refused to attack Rushton's research itself.²⁴

As *London Magazine* described it, the President "effectively blacked out" the debate, defending Rushton's presence on the grounds of "academic freedom." Academic freedom, he claimed, guaranteed that "such ideas can be expressed without fear of interference or repression from University administrators, politicians or others." On this matter, the President was unequivocal: "This is a final statement of the university," he announced tersely.²⁵

Yet such academic protection was remarkably far from his mind as he cast about for ways to undermine the credibility of the *Chilly Climate Report* and its authors. In a private interview with *Western News* which appeared on 23 November 1989, he characterized the *Report* as "shabby work," taking great pains to register his official disgust. "If this had been done as a second-year undergraduate social science paper, it would get a failing grade," he insisted, adding that it was "disappointing and embarrassing to have work of such poor quality by faculty members passed off as reputable research."²⁶ "Academic freedom," as *London Magazine* would later remark, "was no longer an institutional buzzword."²⁷