

## **Curious George Meets the Concordia University Risk Assessment Committee**

**By David Bernans** (with apologies to Margret & H.A. Rey)

Once upon a time there was a third year History student. Let's call him Curious George. George was a good student and always very curious. That got him into a lot of trouble with the administration at Concordia University.

Curious George liked to read. He spent a lot of time hanging around at the Concordia Community Solidarity Co-op Bookstore because there were lots of great books, zines and other reading materials and they were much cheaper to buy than the stuff sold at the Concordia Bookstore.

George read books and articles by Lillian Robinson, Tariq Ali, Deborah Ellis, David Bernans, Naomi Klein, Norman Finkelstein and many other authors. He especially liked to read authors who were as curious as he was, authors who would ask questions that were ignored by most of his professors in Concordia's History Department.

For instance, George noticed that most of his professors, just like most newspapers he read, would call certain violent acts by the name of "terrorism" and other equally reprehensible violent acts would be called "war on terror" or "counter-insurgency operations" or "collateral damage" or some other such term. It didn't matter how many people were killed, or whether targets were military or civilian. If the violence was from the side of the American Empire (including Canada, NATO countries and Israel), then it was always called something other than terrorism. If the violence emanated from the enemies of the American Empire (usually Arab or Muslim enemies), it was always called terrorism.

The man who everyone seemed to think was in charge of the American Empire was also named George, but he was not very curious. His name was George Bush. He did not like to read or hang out at the Concordia Community Solidarity Co-op Bookstore. He used the military and secret services put at his disposal to bomb and occupy other countries, kidnap and torture people, and do all kinds of other things Curious George was very curious about. Curious George wondered why the things the American Empire did were not called terrorism and why George Bush was not called a terrorist.

That's why Curious George liked to hang out at the Co-op Bookstore. There were always books by people who questioned the double-standards and there was always information about things going on at Concordia involving groups of students who were just as curious as Curious George.

One day at the Co-op Bookstore, Curious George heard that Norman Finkelstein, one of his favourite authors, had been denied tenure at DePaul University in Chicago. "Why didn't they give him tenure?" asked George. "He has all kinds of publications and he's an internationally respected academic."

“You’re right,” said Larissa from behind the counter. “His Department and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences voted to grant him tenure, but then Alan Dershowitz led the charge of the wealthy and powerful against his arch enemy Finkelstein. They started a smear campaign and worked with University donors to make sure the University Board on Tenure and Promotion and the President voted to reverse the decision of Finkelstein’s colleagues.”

Curious George remembered Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz and his book, *The Case for Israel*, as the target of Finkelstein’s *Beyond Chutzpah*. Finkelstein effectively demolished Dershowitz’s case that Israel is a tolerant democracy simply by pointing out the documented evidence from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports that shows the exact opposite. Israel, as an occupying power, routinely and systematically violates the human rights of the occupied Palestinian population. In other words, Israel is not a tolerant democracy but an Apartheid regime.

Finkelstein got Dershowitz really mad by pointing out how much of the Harvard professor’s so-called original scholarship was in fact simply lifted from Joan Peter’s book, *From Time Immemorial*. Harvard professors don’t like it when they get called on plagiarism.

“Dershowitz sent an anti-Finkelstein diatribe to pretty much any academic with an email address, including the entire DePaul liberal arts faculty,” said Larissa. “And the pro-Israel lobby began a smear campaign, calling Finkelstein a self-hating Jew who should not be given tenure.”

Curious George knew that Norman Finkelstein was the son of two Holocaust survivors who was constantly warning of how the narrative of the Holocaust was being misused by defenders of Israel to mystify the Israel-Palestine conflict. Finkelstein wanted to protect the memory of Holocaust survivors like his parents from being used to justify the oppression of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. And now he was being denied tenure for being so outspoken in his cause.

Just like the double-standards, Finkelstein’s tenure denial made George mad. But it also made him curious. What would happen if George worked with student groups at Concordia to bring Finkelstein to speak about this whole affair? Maybe such an event, as part of a larger speaking tour, would help bring attention to this attack on academic freedom at DePaul.

“Hey Larissa,” said George. “Let’s bring Finkelstein to Concordia!”

“Oh George,” said Larissa, “you’re so cute when you’re indignant. But be realistic. Concordia won’t let you bring Finkelstein here. The only room big enough is H-110 [the auditorium in the Concordia Hall Building] and they just won’t allow anybody like Finkelstein to speak there. If Amy Goodman was ‘too controversial’ to speak in H-110 then Finkelstein is positively explosive! When QPIRG was denied H-110 for Amy Goodman, they just organized the event at McGill. Maybe you should bring Finkelstein to McGill instead.”

McGill seemed like an easier solution. McGill’s auditorium was only a short walk from Concordia’s downtown campus. But George did not want to see Finkelstein bullied away from Concordia, just like he had been bullied away from DePaul. And George had an idea. “With the Goodman lecture, they didn’t leave themselves enough time to push their way through the Concordia booking system bureaucracy and they had to scramble to move the event to McGill at the last minute. We just need to start the booking process really early, like five months ahead of time. That way we’ll give ourselves enough time to pressure Concordia to allow Finkelstein the freedom to speak at Concordia.”

“Well, for an event like that you’ll need a sponsor,” said Larissa. “Finkelstein is a big-name speaker and you’ll have to fly him in from Chicago!”

“I know just the group!” said George.

The next day, George had a meeting with the President of the Concordia club, Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR). It was a cramped little room on the third floor of a creaky old building on Concordia’s downtown campus.

“It’s not going to be easy,” said Fady. “We brought Finkelstein to speak in H-110 a few years ago, but a lot has changed since then. Now, everything we do to challenge the Israeli occupation gets censored. We did an exhibition just over a year ago on the Mezzanine. We had a whole graveyard of tombstones for children killed by IDF soldiers, with names and photos of the girls and boys killed and the circumstances of their deaths as documented by human rights groups. Over the graveyard we had a banner that said ‘Made in Israel.’ Because of that banner we were banned for doing any more exhibitions for a whole term!”

“And now they’ve closed down the Mezzanine,” said George. “Now you can’t do any more exhibitions at all!”

“But Hillel can bring real-life IDF soldiers to meet-and-greet Concordia students with no problems whatsoever!” said Fady.

George remembered the Hillel-sponsored Valentines Day lovey-dovey meet-and-greet with Israeli military from two years ago – another double-standard. It was okay for Concordia students to meet Israeli soldiers but they could not see the children the soldiers kill. Well, not this time, thought George. This time he would make it his personal mission to have Dr. Finkelstein speak in H-110.

By the end of the week, SPHR had a commitment from Finkelstein to do the event in five months time. That very day, George filled out the necessary paperwork to book H-110 for a lecture they called “Israel and Palestine: Roots of Conflict, Prospects for Peace,” listing SPHR as the event’s sponsoring organization.

A few weeks later he got a phone call from a man named Bob from Concordia Security asking for more details about the event. What precisely would Dr. Finkelstein be talking about? Would any other speakers be at the event? Would any films or videos be shown at the event? Were any other organizations involved? Were any outside organizations involved in the event?

George did his best to answer Concordia Security’s questions but he did not know the answers to all of them. How could George know precisely what Norman Finkelstein would be talking about until he actually saw him speak?

And, of course, George was curious, so he had some questions of his own for Bob. Did Concordia Security call event organizers for every booking request at Concordia to ask these questions? What criteria were used to decide which organizers to call and what questions to ask? Did they call to ask these questions about events that were not connected to Arab or Muslim student organizations? To all of George’s questions, Bob’s response was always the same: “We cannot discuss Concordia University’s security procedures.”

A few weeks after talking to Bob for the first time, the event received approval from Concordia Booking Services. It seemed that everything would work out fine. But Fady was sceptical. “No way will they let us do this event,” he predicted. “They’ll censor the event. Just wait and see. We should book the auditorium at McGill as a backup plan, just to be safe.”

Sure enough, three months later, less than two weeks before the event was to take place, George found himself talking to Bob once again. It seemed that the event had caught the attention of something called the “Risk Assessment Committee.” Bob could not tell George much more than that.

“Sorry George,” said Bob. “According to the assessment, H-110 is not suitable for the kind of event you want to do. You’re Security approval for the event has been revoked. Please check with Booking Services to find another venue.”

“But there *is* no other venue big enough at Concordia!” George objected. “You’re telling us we have to cancel the event. This is censorship.”

George could sense Bob shrugging over the telephone. The decision had been taken at a much higher level. Bob’s hands were tied.

George was curious. He asked what made the Risk Assessment Committee decide that H-110 was unsuitable for the event.

Bob said, “We cannot discuss Concordia University’s security procedures.”

George asked who was on the Risk Assessment Committee.

Bob said, “We cannot discuss Concordia University’s security procedures.”

Fady suggested they redo all their advertising and have Finkelstein speak at McGill instead. They could work with the SPHR chapter there to book a suitable venue.

But Curious George refused to give up. He decided to go and see his student representatives at the Concordia Student Union. It was their job to advocate on his behalf with the Concordia administration.

When George got to the CSU offices on the seventh floor of the Hall Building, he was surprised to see how corporate-looking the reception area of the CSU looked. George was curious about how much money his student representatives must have spent on all the renovations and furniture.

He asked the receptionist to see one of the CSU executives. The receptionist apologized and explained that all the CSU executives would be busy for the whole day. They had a meeting with some lawyers about “CFS-Q issues.” After that, they were supposed to have cocktails with Al Gore, David Suzuki and the Concordia Board of Governors at the Palais des Congrès. After that, they would be getting shitfaced at Reggie’s, the CSU-owned bar which did not give free beer to CSU executives but no it would not be possible to see the finances because they were not under the CSU operating budget but rather under the CSU-owned CUSACorp budget.

George was curious to know what “CFS-Q issues” were and why his student representatives were meeting with lawyers about them. He was curious to know why every last one of the CSU executives had to go to a cocktail event with famous people and the Concordia Board of Governors. And he was very, very curious about the financial relationship between the CSU, the student bar and CUSACorp, but he did not have time to ask questions about any of these things. He needed help dealing with censorship at Concordia and he needed it now.

George explained everything to the receptionist who was very nice and seemed to know a lot about the Concordia bureaucracy. “I think I know one of the people on the committee that cancelled your event,” said the receptionist. “Her name is Sue Magor. She’s the Director of Environmental Health and Safety.”

Lucky for George, Sue Magor was in her office. It was not yet time for cocktails at the Palais des Congrès. She was very nice to George, but unfortunately, she seemed to be unable to help resolve the matter. “There is no such thing as the ‘Risk Assessment Committee,’” she insisted. “I am on a committee called the ‘Emergency Management Team,’ and I can tell you that we did not cancel your Security approval.”

Sue Magor even showed George the Emergency Management Team's structure and the official Concordia University policy that gave the committee its mandate. Part of the committee's mandate was to "review risk assessments and react accordingly" but Sue Magor said the committee did not review any risk assessment of the Finkelstein event. This could not have been the committee that Bob was talking about. But surely, if such a committee existed, the University's Director of Environmental Health and Safety would know about it, wouldn't she?

George was sad and confused. He did not know if the Risk Assessment Committee really existed or not. If the committee did exist, he had no explanation as to why the committee had revoked the Security approval for the Finkelstein event and he did not even know who to talk to about getting it unrevoked. If the committee did not exist, then who did revoke the Finkelstein event's Security approval?

If this were a children's story, this is where the man with the yellow hat would come and help George make everything right again. But that is not how this story ends.

The only way for George to overcome censorship by secret committee at Concordia University is through collective action involving folks like you. Students, professors, staff and the public at large need to organize to oppose the edicts of the secret and unaccountable Risk Assessment Committee.

Unlike George, we do know for sure that the Risk Assessment Committee exists, and we know who chairs the committee (VP Services, Michael Di Grappa). That much has been established with the help of the Québec Access to Information Commission. We need to know more. We need to be more curious!

Concordia continues to refuse to reveal the past and present membership of the committee. It refuses to allow students and faculty associations to appoint representatives to sit on the committee. It refuses to allow a public review of committee procedures and past decisions. Concordia even refuses to establish a policy which would require the committee to provide reasons when it gives an event a negative risk assessment.

Officially, Concordia is a public university. But it will only be truly accountable to the public when the public *demand*s accountability.

The end.