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Rushton's ideas died with him

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Even in death, nearly 25 years after he drew tabloid-TV attention from the likes of Geraldo Rivera and ignited a fiery argument about racism and free speech, Philippe Rushton still provokes deep emotions.

While Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, who famously engaged Rushton in a televised debate at Western University in 1989, declined to comment on Rushton's passing, former Ontario premier David Peterson's feelings were clear in an e-mail response to a request to talk about the late psychology professor.

"I think it's appropriate when people pass that others try to speak well of them," Peterson wrote.

Peterson was just one of many who campaigned to have Rushton fired from his Western post.

With his bizarre measurements of brains and genitalia and his loopy theory that genetic factors make blacks less intelligent, less sexually restrained and less law-abiding than Asians and whites, Rushton was a lightning rod who galvanized London like never before.

"(The controversy) took six months of my life," recalls Brian Timney, the dean of Western University's faculty of social science who, during the late 1980s, served

as undergraduate co-ordinator for the school's beleaguered psychology department. "I remember it well."

At the time, Western found itself attacked on two sides: By anti-racism advocates who denounced the university for allowing Rushton to spread his theories, and by academics who argued Western was infringing on Rushton's freedoms.

Western officials defended Rushton, a stance Timney still supports.

"I wouldn't enjoy doing it, but I would do it again," he says. "I think that, in the end, the whole case shows the value of academic freedom, and that defending people who say controversial things is a good thing."

Timney maintains that allowing Rushton's theories to be openly debated ultimately led to their dismissal.

"It's considered fringe science," Timney says. "There are very few people who (still) pay attention to it."

Local lawyer John Judson recalls how he defended Rushton during the height of the controversy.

"I told Dr. Rushton on a number of occasions that I was not personally comfortable with the thrust of his research," says the Lerner's partner. "But

that did not relieve me of the obligation to defend his right to do the research."

Even today, Judson refuses to denounce the quiet-spoken researcher.

"I never would have put the label 'racist' on him," Judson says. "Whatever one's view of the merits of his research, he had to be respected for his zeal and commitment and courage in dealing with issues of academic freedom."

But lawyer Raj Anand, the former chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission who represented a group of Western student complainants against Rushton, still believes the late professor exceeded the limits of academic freedom.

"There's nothing unusual about laws regulating speech, because speech can be harmful in the same way the exertion of physical strength can be harmful," says Anand, who works with the Toronto-based firm WeirFoulds. "There needs to be a balancing process, and I think (Rushton) went too far."

And yes, he did. But as much as we may find Rushton's views dangerously repugnant, I think we should thank him for reminding us that universities should be open to an uninhibited exchange of ideas, because that's where vile views can best be challenged and rejected.

We should be able to defend somebody's right to say something, without necessarily defending what is being said.

Because in the end, under the harsh light of examination, Rushton's odious ideas dried up and disappeared. "I remember teaching a class (about 10 years ago) and using his

research as an example of how not to do research," recalls Timney. "And I mentioned his name, and it was blank faces."

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