

Saudi academics must speak up for the freedom to dissent

Contributed to The Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Jan. 20 2015, 7:54 AM EST

Last updated Tuesday, Jan. 20 2015, 7:54 AM EST

Dear Professor Jean-Lou Chameau, president, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology:

When the new “King Abdullah University of Science and Technology” was inaugurated in 2009 it was recognised as a visionary attempt to “rekindle science in the Islamic world.” To mark the significance of the occasion, His Majesty King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia invited heads of state and Nobel laureates to participate. The undersigned continue to take a profound and sympathetic interest in this visionary undertaking. As members of the international scientific and scholarly community we owe it to KAUST to assist it in becoming a leading institution for education and research. All such academies have the right to assistance from others, worldwide, and everyone is heavily dependent on receiving that assistance.

We write out of concern that the fabric of international co-operation may be torn apart by dismay at the severe restrictions on freedom of thought and expression still being applied to Saudi Arabian society. We have no doubt that members of KAUST share that concern, aware that the cruel sentence passed, for example, on Mr. Raif Badawi, who established a forum for open discussion, sent a shock around the world. We take real hope from the fact that the government of Saudi Arabia, responding to international outcry, is re-considering that sentence.

It is in this context of a new willingness to listen to pleas on behalf of tolerance that we write to you today. We are confident that influential voices in KAUST will be heard arguing for the freedom to dissent, without which no institution of higher learning can be viable. The time is ripe for new thinking after millions in Paris, supported by the government of Saudi Arabia, demonstrated on behalf of minority views. We are aware that change comes by degrees, but we write at this time since it seems, a mere five years into KAUST’s history, to be a crucial time for KAUST.

The undersigned friends of KAUST will be there to support you in asserting the values of freedom that we are all agreed are essential to the future of a University in this twenty first century, and that will determine the success of the extraordinary venture which you lead.

Sincerely,

John Polanyi, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, Canada;
Martin Chalfie Nobel Laureate Chemistry, U.S.;
John Coetzee, Nobel Laureate Literature, Australia/South Africa;
Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, Nobel Laureate, Physics, France;
Richard Ernst, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, Switzerland;
Gerhard Ertl, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, Germany;

Shelly Glashow, Nobel Laureate, Physics, U.S.;
Dudley Herschbach, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, U.S.;
Roald Hoffmann, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, U.S.;
Brian Josephson, Nobel Laureate, Physics, U.K.;
Martin Karplus, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, U.S.;
Harold Kroto, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, U.K./U.S.;
Yuan Lee, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, Taiwan/U.S.;
Rudy Marcus, Nobel Laureate, Chemistry, Canada/U.S.;
Richard Roberts, Nobel Laureate, Physiology or Medicine, U.S.;
John Sulston, Nobel Laureate, Physiology or Medicine, U.K.;
Jack Szostak, Nobel Laureate, Physiology or Medicine, U.S.;
Eric Wieschaus, Nobel Laureate, Physiology or Medicine, U.S.

Source: [The Globe and Mail](#)