

**SLIDE 1: title page**

**Spoken text:**

Thanks very much, I'm honoured by the invitation to address you all.

Before I turn to math, I want to briefly address how I ended up here.

I was invited to deliver a lecture, and accepted.

I then withdrew my acceptance.

Then the president of the CMS resigned.

I then was re-invited, and once again accepted.

Then I submitted my title and abstract for the talk.

Then the scientific directors of this meeting both resigned.

The catalyst for this unusual sequence had to do with a decision by the CMS to remove speaker photos from the meeting website.

In the photos, I was wearing a keffiyeh.

## **SLIDE 2:**

**Title:** Keffiyehs

**Image:** A keffiyeh

**Spoken text:**

This is a middle-eastern scarf that has been around for centuries.

It was originally just a headdress worn by nomads and farmers to protect against sun and sand.

But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was worn by people fighting against colonial rule of their territories by a foreign empire.

And more recently, it is worn by people from other parts of the world,

as an expression of solidarity with a population suffering from the effects of a genocidal war and an illegal occupation.

**SLIDE 3:**

**Title:** Keffiyehs

**Image:** Sarah Jama in a keffiyeh

**Spoken text:**

This photo is from April 2024,

when Ontario MPP Sarah Jama was banned from the Ontario legislative chamber for wearing a keffiyeh,

Her reasons for wearing a keffiyeh were similar to my own.

**SLIDE 4:** Title: Keffiyehs

**Image:** Nelson Mandela in a keffiyeh.

**Spoken text:**

In fact, the keffiyeh has been worn as an expression of solidarity for quite some time.

This photo is from 1990.

(Pause)

The details of the discussion between me and the CMS that led to me unaccepting and then (re)accepting to deliver the lecture and to the various CMS `resignations don't need to detain us.

But there is one aspect of that discussion that I do think it is interesting to consider collectively.

The question of "neutrality" came up a lot in the discussion. The CMS ultimately decided to add to their website, and I quote, a "disclaimer stating that the CMS is neutral and does not endorse the positions or opinions of speakers".

I'd like to think together about what political neutrality means in the context of professional societies.

--

## SLIDE 5:

### Title: **Should gay sex be punishable by prison?**

**Content:** "Gay people should no more be put in prison for having consensual sex than straight people should." – David L Hull, "the social responsibility of professional societies".

### Spoken text:

This is a quote from the first paragraph of an academic article titled "the social responsibility of professional societies".

That article was published in 2002.

In 2002, same-sex **marriage** was legal in zero American states and zero Canadian provinces.

In fact, in 2002, gay **sex** was illegal, in the 14 US states with anti-sodomy laws.

Well, in 2002, professional societies had to ask: can we hold our annual meetings in states where gay people are considered felons?

To quote from that article:

"Early on certain professional societies, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, were very active in attempting to protect the rights of gay people. Many others were not.

For example, only this year has the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association adopted a policy of not meeting in states that have antisodomy laws.

The Eastern and Central Divisions remain silent on the issue."

In 2002, equal rights for queer people was a controversial topic,

and the politically neutral position for professional societies was to stay silent on the question of whether gay sex should be criminalized.

## **SLIDE 6**

**Title:** Neutrality in academia

**Content:**

In 2022, ``88 percent of professors at Canadian universities identified themselves as either `somewhat' or `very' left-leaning compared to only 12 percent who self-identify as right-leaning".

**Spoken text:**

This quote is from a report published by the Macdonald Laurier Institute, a conservative public policy think tank.

It has been quoted 8 times in the last year and a half, at meetings of the Canadian Parliament's Standing Committee on Science and Research.

It's been quoted by both committee members and witnesses, who view this left-leaning position as a problem.

Some of you may have heard of this committee recently, after they passed a motion requiring NSERC (and the other federal funding agencies) to release 25 years of grant and scholarship application data.

They were requesting disaggregated data: which means all of the individual applications, both successful and unsuccessful.

They were requesting all parts of the applications, which means in particular sections describing career delays due to medical or other issues.

They were also requesting all of the confidential referee reports on those applications.

This motion was passed unanimously as part of a search for what MAGA politicians would call "illegal DEI" in the grant application process.

It was rescinded after the committee received a lot of criticism of the motion, including an open letter of objection signed by over 5000 Canadian academics – no doubt, by some of you.

## **SLIDE 7:**

**Title:** Political and ideological neutrality

**Content:**

“I recommend that [NSERC, SSHRC and CIHR’s] enabling legislation be amended to enshrine a commitment to political and ideological neutrality. To ensure such neutrality, I also recommend that all references to EDI be removed from agency guidelines and criteria. This includes the elimination of many of SSHRC’s EDI-focused grants.”

- Dave Snow

**Spoken text:**

Dave Snow was one of the parliamentary committee witnesses who quoted the above 88% statistic.

He’s a professor of Political Science in Guelph, and also a senior fellow at Macdonald Laurier, the think tank which wrote the report.

He made this recommendation this fall, to the parliamentary committee I just mentioned.

Now, frequently, the politically “neutral” position is the same as the politically dominant position.

And when it is not the same, it rarely challenges the dominant one.

However, there is no reason to *assume* that the politically “neutral” position is the one we as academics should adopt *by default*.

In 2002, the politically neutral position was to stay silent on the question of whether gay sex was a felony. The effect was to accept holding conferences in places where our colleagues faced criminal prosecution.

In 1970, the politically neutral position was to stay silent on the question of whether homosexuality was a mental disorder. It was officially classified as such by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973.

As many of you know, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great mathematical minds, Alan Turing, was forced to choose between chemical castration or imprisonment because of the crime of homosexuality.

It was over 50 years after his death by suicide that he was pardoned by the Queen.

In the 1960's, ensuring that job "applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, color, or national origin" was politically contentious (this text is from an executive order issued by Lyndon Johnson on September 24, 1965).

Again: the politically "neutral" position, which is typically the politically dominant position, is often one that we as academics should not align ourselves with.

## **SLIDE 8:**

**Title:** Overton Window

**Content:** Wikipedia image of Overton Window

**Spoken text:**

Some of you will have heard of the Overton window.

The Overton window is the range of positions and arguments that is politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time.

The key to the concept of the Overton window is that it can shift or shrink or expand over time.

Today's common sense may be yesterday's heresy. Today's uncomfortable position may be tomorrow's accepted wisdom.

The above examples illustrate that viewpoints that are politically and socially acceptable frequently include some that are morally and ethically indefensible, in the abstract sense, and cause real harm, in the direct sense.

Academics hold social power by virtue of our positions and our reputations as smart people, as “thinkers”, and through our work as teachers and advisers.

We have relative freedom to use our social power by virtue of our job security.

I think it is incumbent on us to reflect on and use that power in morally responsible ways.

## **SLIDE 9:**

**Title:** For whom is neutrality an option?

**Content:** Zinn's book cover.

**Spoken text:**

I have at least two junior colleagues who are trans.

One of them is no longer comfortable travelling to the US.

The other is based in the US and was on the job market last year.

There are at least 30 out of 50 states where they did not feel safe applying for jobs, and their first choice is still to find a way out of the US.

Twenty-eight out of 50 US states have passed anti-trans legislation in 2025.

“Neutrality” is not an option for trans mathematicians – or their mentors.

--

Iranian math students based in Canada can effectively no longer attend academic meetings in the US, since the June 4, 2025 executive order suspending entry of Iranians.

“Neutrality” is not an option for Iranian mathematicians.

--

In 1971, the fledgling Association for Women in Math fought hard to get one of their members – Mary Gray - placed on the ballot to allow her to run for council of the American Mathematical Society.

That effort, which included organizing a petition drive, failed.

Mary Gray is now a Fellow of the American Mathematical Society.

It took politics – and courage – to get her there, not “neutrality”.

--

Until 1960, Black mathematicians could not participate in AMS meetings.

It took politics to change that policy, not “neutrality”.

--

In 1937-38, the president of the AMS was Robert Lee Moore, a racist and antisemite who would not allow blacks in his classes, and who spoke of an “invasion” of Jewish émigré mathematicians.

Today, the AMS has a statement on their website saying it “recognizes and abjures R.L. Moore’s racist views and behaviours”.

--

Members of politically dominant groups have the luxury to ignore politics.

We have the luxury of believing that neutrality is an option.

But neutrality is, at best, a way of accepting an imperfect status quo.

At worst, it is a way of averting our eyes as the world burns around us.

I invite us, as a community, not to avert our eyes.

OK – now to math.

## List of slides

1. Trees
2. Bienaymé trees
3. Trichotomy
4. Distances in random graphs  
(diam definition; the Erdős-Rényi random graph)
5. Diameter of  $G(n,p)$
  
6. FIXED-DEGREE MODELS
7. Trees with given child sequences
8. Heights of trees with given child sequences  
(path example; our theorem; tightness)
9. Graphs with given degree sequences  
Diameters of graphs with given degree sequences  
(cycle example; our theorem)
10. Minimum degree 3
  
11. SOME PROOF IDEAS
12. Sampling uniform binary trees
13. The length of the first branch
14. The height of the (binary) tree
15. Stochastic comparison
16. Lower degrees make taller trees
17. Binary trees are the tallest
18. A tool for Theorem 2: the core-kernel decomposition
19. Recovering a graph from its core
20. Diameter bounds for random graphs
21. A conjecture