

May 4th, 2009

Dressing Down CPLED (Canadian Centre for Professional Legal Education)

By Alice Woolley

As the warmth of spring has replaced the cold of winter, so too have our occasionally idiosyncratically attired law students been replaced by suit wearing post-graduates attending the Canadian Centre for Professional Legal Education (CPLED) course. Attendance at CPLED, and successful completion of its various assignments, is a pre-requisite for any person wishing to become a member of the Law Society of Alberta.

So too, it turns out, is donning a suit. The [2008-2009 Handbook](#) for students attending CPLED in Alberta states:

Please wear business attire to class. You may not be allowed into class, and a note may be placed on your Law society [sic] file, if you are not dressed appropriately.

Students attending CPLED are, apparently, further advised that “business attire” means attire appropriate for students working at a large law firm, i.e., suits.

Seriously? In order to satisfy the requirements to become a member of the Law Society of Alberta you must demonstrate the capacity to wear a suit for a week?

The Law Society of Alberta exists to regulate the legal profession in the public interest. It exercises state power - granted by legislation - over both lawyers and those seeking admission to the Law Society. As a regulatory authority, the Law Society’s imposition of requirements on its members - or on those seeking membership - must be legitimate. They must, in other words, make some claim to justification beyond “because I can”.

What claim can this dress code make to legitimacy? It cannot be because the practice of law requires suit wearing; many lawyers do not do so (even some working at big law firms). Competent and ethical legal practice can occur in jeans and a t-shirt. Indeed, such casual clothing may be necessary to make clients more comfortable and better able to communicate with counsel who otherwise appear as much part of the system as an aid to navigating it successfully.

As evidenced by the practices of various faith traditions, clothes are an important form of self-expression. They may also be so for the environmental or social activist who has no interest in participating in the corporate cultural norms which she went to law school for the purpose of

resisting. She should not be required to conform with those norms in order to meet the requirements for bar admission.

It is said that the job of the lawyer is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Law societies should be proud of the ability of lawyers to be outliers and non-conformists, to challenge accepted norms and to resist improper exercises of state power. To instead push conformity, to frame the experience of bar entry as equivalent to membership in an establishment club, is the worst possible message for the Law Society of Alberta to send.