

Amid mounting opposition, former Michigan Governor Snyder withdraws from Harvard fellowship

By Sheila Brehm
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On Wednesday, just days after Harvard University announced that former Michigan Governor Rick Snyder had accepted its offer of a senior research fellowship at Harvard Kennedy School's Taubman Center for State and Local Government, Snyder announced on Twitter that he was withdrawing from the position.

The decision came in the face of widespread opposition on the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts; in Flint, Michigan, where tens of thousands of residents suffered lead poisoning as a result of his administration's decision to switch the city's water supply; and nationally. In less than three days, more than 7,000 people signed an online petition that urged the rescinding of the fellowship. Thousands more expressed opposition to the appointment on social media.

Snyder wrote on Twitter: "It would have been exciting to share my experiences, both positive and negative; our current political environment and its lack of civility makes this too disruptive."

Later on Wednesday, Professor Douglas Elmendorf, the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government, posted a memo to faculty and students confirming Snyder's withdrawal from the fellowship. Elmendorf made it clear in his notice that the decision was not simply Snyder's, suggesting that Harvard had applied pressure on him to withdraw.

"I believe the Kennedy School needs to study both failures and successes of government," Elmendorf wrote, "and we anticipated that students would have learned from engaging with and questioning Governor Snyder about his consequential role in decisions regarding Flint and many other issues during his eight

years in office.

"We appreciate Governor Snyder's interest in participating in such discussions in our community, but we and he now believe that having him on campus would not enhance education here in the ways we intended."

Harvard's initial announcement that Snyder had signed on for the prestigious fellowship made no mention of the former governor's role in the poisoning of Flint's water supply. Professor Jeffrey Liebman, the Taubman Center's director, asserted that the two-term, widely despised Republican governor "brings expertise in management, public policy and promoting civility."

That the "poisoner-in-chief" responsible for widespread suffering was being rewarded by the Ivy League university instead of doing jail time evoked an outpouring of anger and disgust. Many people outraged by Harvard's original announcement took to Twitter. Eric Milikin, for example, tweeted, "Rick Snyder thinks the problem with our current political environment is that people complain about him when he poisons us."

The change.org petition was initiated by Tiffani Bell on Monday. She is a 2017 technology and democracy fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Referencing Liebman's statement about Snyder's "promoting civility," she wrote, "This is the same Rick Snyder that presided over the Flint water crisis that still haunts families in Michigan today."

The petition reads: "Thanks to Snyder's 'leadership,' people died [1], countless children were poisoned [2], and Flint residents still cannot trust the water coming out of their faucets. Even worse, Flint

residents were actually expected to pay water bills for water they couldn't and shouldn't drink [3]. To add further insult to injury, Snyder allowed the state of Michigan to stop providing bottles of water free-of-charge to families dependent on Flint's polluted water [4]. When using bottled water was the only way many Michiganders could cook, bathe, or brush their teeth, that was the very least Snyder could have done."

Eric Von Stein, one of the petition's signers, commented: "Rick Snyder should be prosecuted for crimes against humanity, not awarded a Harvard fellowship." Karen Leader wrote, "As a university professor, I know that our first responsibility is to use our enormous privilege ethically. This is a terrible decision and the offer should be withdrawn."

A comment on Politico.com from Benjamine Dover stated: "Oh that rich guy who allowed constituents to be poisoned complaining about a lack of civility." Terry Underwood reflected the sentiments of many thousands, writing: "Withdrawing his fellowship isn't enough. The man needs to be put in jail."

Florisa Fowler, an affected Flint resident who posted and signed the online petition, told the WSWS, "Interesting, Snyder cites our disruptive political environment for his reason for turning it down. Even though Snyder has turned down the fellowship today, I have still lost all respect for Harvard's fellowship and academic standards as they currently stand. Why would they make this offer in the first place? Another blatant disregard for the people."

The Harvard offer was a provocation. It is a telling sign of the moral and social gulf in the US that it seems not to have occurred to university officials that offering a position to this hated figure might arouse resistance.

The Snyder/Harvard episode sheds light on the real state of affairs developing in the US. The poisoning of the Flint population is known throughout the world. It has come to symbolize a crime of capitalism, like the Grenfell fire disaster in the UK and Hurricane Katrina.

There is widespread sympathy and support for the population of Flint combined with anger over the indifference of the political establishment to the plight of the working class and the fact that five years after the onset of the water crisis, not one top official has been charged, prosecuted or jailed. On the contrary, the newly elected Democratic governor of Michigan,

Gretchen Whitmer, and her attorney general recently dropped all criminal charges against eight lower- and mid-level officials.

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