

If Andrew Potter's McGill resignation resulted from political pressure, that would be outrageous

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Andrew Potter has resigned as the Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. This is a shame.

Were Andrew not a friend of mine, I would hold the same opinion.

To begin, two questions: Was his resignation demanded by the Principal of McGill? Second, did the principal receive calls demanding his resignation from senior politicians, including those who saw fit to criticize Potter publicly? If so, this is outrageous. It seems to me that the correct response of a university leader who receives such a call would be to politely end the conversation. And having received such a call, interference from politicians should end virtually any consideration of firing. It should not make it more likely.

I do not know if such calls were made — on Thursday McGill offered a National Post reporter making those inquiries no more than the short public statement they'd released that morning announcing the change in Andrew's employment and saying there would be no further comment — but the question should be put to those political actors who saw fit to criticize Potter publicly. Did they take their criticism further than public?

All McGill faculty should reflect on what happened Thursday. Do they feel more or less secure to do their work today? Do they feel more or less secure in their rights to criticize the government? Do they feel more enabled to take positions which are controversial and perhaps wrong, but to submit them to public comment and scrutiny nonetheless? Or do they feel that they should check themselves?

For the record, I think Andrew's column was sloppy, careless, and unconvincing. But I also think that characterizes a large share of academic work, including that which I regularly review for journals.

I thought apologizing was the right thing to do, precisely because Andrew realized he was wrong and especially because he caused offence. To be wrong and to hurt people in the process is a risk academics take. We have to bear the consequences. The consequences are that we have to admit we are wrong and commit to not making the mistake in the future. There is shame in being in that position. That's the cost. But the response shouldn't be firing. That generates caution and kowtowing. It will invite a less intelligent and less democratic society.

If Potter were pushed out, I can imagine the defences that will be offered. First, that his article was not published in an academic outlet. Second, that he was only pushed out of an administrative, and not an academic role.

These are bad arguments. On the first: if we only extend the protections of academic freedom to peer-reviewed claims, then we invite three bad outcomes. First, faculty will be reluctant to share their knowledge. It will remain in gated and inaccessible academic journals. Second, they'll be less likely to engage in public debate, for fear of saying something wrong and now unprotected. Third, absent this opportunity, even their basic research will move farther away from questions of public interest. We all lose under this scenario. Universities desperate for public relevance lose especially.

On the second objection: it's silly. Academic roles have many components. Administrative service is almost always one of them. Sometimes this is weighted up in an official role. Other times, it comes through committee work you do as a regular faculty member. Academics must always do this ethically and responsibly. But managerial responsibility and accountability is different than holding an opinion. To fire an academic from a position because they hold (or offered) a controversial opinion is a signal to all ambitious academics that they should always play it safe. Take no risks. Straight down the middle. Say nothing controversial. Do nothing interesting.

If you want universities filled only with views acceptable to everyone (or worse, to a self-appointed censor), go ahead. They'll be uninteresting and not worth a damn. They'll be like a bad Twitter feed: no humour, no insight, just affirmations of bias and stale, anodyne snark. Of late, I've had a great collaboration with Andrew. As it happens, just this week McGill-Queen's University Press released a book I co-edited with Andrew and Daniel Weinstock on electoral reform. Given the government cancelling the reform process (a good thing), the book is now already outdated (a bad thing). But the thing I'm very proud of is the content of the book and how it was brought together.

Andrew had the idea to hold two conferences this fall, to ask leading academics to draft short and pointed chapters on changing how we vote. He convinced a publisher to get the book out and into press in three months. This is lightning speed in the academic world, and it reflects the kind of work Andrew was pushing at MISC. Academically centred but publicly engaged. Relevant. In the arena.

In addition to this, he convened a major conference on diversity in Canada. The keynotes are available online and they're well worth watching, because they feature politicians actually saying provocative and important things.

He was, for a person less than a year in the job, having fantastic success.

In my estimation, MISC was returning to its rightful status as a leading place for Canadian Studies and with a flair for public engagement. Andrew's op-ed would have set that work back a

bit, but not irreparably. Indeed, his humility and grace in recent days suggests he would have mended fences just fine.

With the right signal from university leadership and with sufficient self-regard, academics can learn to move beyond their differences and to allow for mistakes. But that process has been short-circuited at McGill.

Andrew will bounce back. I wish MISC well. I am not sure it will come back from this. And I wish McGill well. For such a thing to lead to a resignation it's obvious the university is under incredible pressure.

I am not sure a university can properly and optimally function under such pressure. No amount of federal or provincial money can make up for faculty who feel they have to constantly look over their shoulders. And no amount of backroom support for a principal can make up for losing the confidence of faculty.

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