

## This is not how a liberal society responds to criticism

Criticism that is the stuff of five-alarm meltdowns in Quebec passes unnoticed elsewhere.

Andrew Coyne | March 24, 2017 8:52 PM ET

<http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/andrew-coyne-quebecs-reaction-to-potters-critiques-shows-it-is-no-liberal-society>

It will be revealed before long who forced out Andrew Potter at McGill and why, but the affair is already a calamity for the university, and for the principles of academic freedom and intellectual inquiry for which it supposedly stands.

Whether or not overt political interference proves to have been involved, it is simply incomprehensible in a modern democracy that anyone, let alone a distinguished scholar and one of the country's most thoughtful journalists (I count myself, in the interest of full disclosure, as one of his many friends), could lose their job over a piece of social criticism. Even worse, perhaps, are the attempts to defend this shabby and illiberal behaviour.

Whatever the piece's flaws might or might not have been, they do not justify either the university's treatment of Potter, or the vastly intemperate popular and media response that seems to have precipitated it; indeed I suspect the response would have been much the same had it been without fault. For all the attention paid to an exaggerated anecdote about restaurant bills I don't see anyone denying the accuracy of the many Statistics Canada data points that made up the bulk of the piece.

It is rather his conclusions — that there is a “malaise” at the root of Quebec society, a crisis of trust, a loss of social cohesion — that raised such heat. Or rather no, it was that these were the conclusions of what I see we are delicately calling a “perceived outsider.” This is as revealing in itself as any observation Potter might have offered; the scale and tone of the reaction, even more so.

Was it a stretch to cite the failure of the authorities to respond to a recent snowstorm as an example of this malaise? Probably. Did he clinch his case, in the course of a 1000-word column, that Quebec suffers a particularly advanced case of this disease? Probably not. But for goodness sake: if every overstated thesis or mistake of fact were a resigning offence, then fire all the journalists, and the academics, too, including those lining up to put the boot into Potter now that he is down.

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Criticize the piece, mock it if you like, as you would any piece you disliked. Or do as most people do: shrug, roll your eyes, and turn the page. But that is not what happened here, as it has not in past cases where Quebec has come under scrutiny. Rather the same well-worn rituals of

outrage, out of all proportion to the actual offence, were performed by the same pantomime cast of journalists and politicians, in the style that has become all too familiar.

We are urged at all times to consider Quebec's uniqueness. Very well. But if that uniqueness includes unique virtues — perhaps even that sense of social solidarity Potter called into question — it is not impossible that it could also embrace unique vices. Complaints about “Quebec-bashing” may have less to do with the volume of critiques from “outsiders” than the political class's terminal habit of rising to the bait. Criticism that is the stuff of five-alarm meltdowns in Quebec passes unnoticed elsewhere.

It is revealing enough that so many of Potter's critics seem unaware this is not the norm in other places. I enjoyed the writer who challenged his readers to replace the word Quebec with “any other nation” in one of Potter's most celebrated phrases. All right, I'll bite.

“(The United States) is an almost pathologically alienated and low-trust society, deficient in many of the most basic forms of social capital that Canadians take for granted.” Sounds like the kind of thinkpiece one could read on any given day.

And not just about the United States. How many times have I seen Canadian society described as “fundamentally racist,” “based on hatred of women” and so on? Outlandish as they are, these are staple clichés of academic and journalistic commentary. And yet not only are they not the subject of foaming displays of indignation, people are given government grants to write them. For that matter, as the long-time Montreal Gazette columnist Don Macpherson has pointed out, Quebec writers themselves often describe the province in far more unflattering terms.

And here we get to the nub of the issue. The peculiar thin-skinnedness of the Quebec political class is not some innate quality: it is ideological. The heat in the response, the very language, with its reference to “attacks” and comparisons to “racism,” is of a kind that one would expect in response, not to a good-faith critique of society, but an ethnic slur.

But this conflation of a state or society with an ethnic group contradicts one of the central conceits of Quebec nationalism: that it is not, at bottom, the project of an ethno-state, but of a liberal society like any other; that a “Quebecer is anyone who wants to be.” But liberal societies do not respond in this way to criticism.

Let's be clear: Critiquing the society that surrounds them is what academics and journalists do. It is what they are supposed to do. The minute they stop doing that, the minute they fall in line with prevailing mythologies, uphold official pieties, deny legitimate criticisms, and most especially when they take it upon themselves to help round up the dissenters for punishment — that is when they should lose their jobs.