

Director of McGill Institute for the Study of Canada steps down after publishing column critical of Quebec, and many raise questions about academic freedom.

[Elizabeth Redden](#)

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March 24, 2017

The director of McGill University's Institute for the Study of Canada has resigned from his post after a magazine column he wrote about "social malaise" in Quebec came under heavy criticism, including from the province's premier.

In announcing his resignation on social media, Andrew Potter, a former newspaper editor with a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Toronto, cited "the ongoing negative reaction within the university community and the broader public to my column" as the reason. He has apologized for aspects of the column.

[View image on Twitter](#)

March 22 2017

In light of the ongoing negative reaction within the university community and the broader public to my column published in the March 20 online edition of Maclean's, I have submitted my resignation as Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, effective immediately.

I deeply regret many aspects of the column – its sloppy use of anecdotes, its tone, and the way it comes across as deeply critical of the entire province. That wasn't my intention, it doesn't reflect my views of Quebec, and I am heartbroken that the situation has evolved the way it has.

This has been the dream job of a lifetime, but I have come to the conclusion that the credibility of the Institute will be best served by my resignation. I intend to continue with my current academic position at McGill, and I hope to serve the school in any place I might be effective.

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[Andrew Potter](#)

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Because I can't figure out Facebook, here's my resignation statement:

[10:55 AM - 23 Mar 2017](#)

"This has been the dream job of a lifetime, but I have come to the conclusion that the credibility of the institute will be best served by my resignation," Potter wrote. He will continue in his position as an associate professor in the Faculty of Arts at McGill, one of Canada's leading universities.

News about Potter's resignation immediately raised speculation about whether Potter was pushed out and concerns about academic freedom at McGill -- concerns that the university's leader described as "unfounded." The university was, however, quick to disassociate itself from Potter's piece.

Potter did not respond to *Inside Higher Ed's* request for an interview. The Canadian news magazine *Maclean's*, which published Potter's offending column, [cited unnamed sources](#) saying that "McGill endured such intense backlash over Potter's *Maclean's* piece that the university left him only two choices: resign or be fired."

"If it is true that the McGill administration bowed to external pressure and forced Professor Potter to step down, then this would be one of the most serious violations of academic freedom in recent years," David Robinson, the executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, said in [a statement](#). "Universities have an absolute obligation to protect and defend the academic freedom of their faculty from outside influences."

In [a public message](#), McGill's principal and vice chancellor (the equivalent of president), Suzanne Fortier, said the board of the institute accepted Potter's resignation "regretfully." She wrote that Potter's "resignation provoked unfounded rumors and concerns regarding academic freedom," which she described as a "foundational principle" for the university.

"The mission of MISC is to promote a better understanding of Canada through the study of our heritage and to support the study of Canada across the country and internationally," Fortier wrote. "Professor Potter recognized that he had failed to uphold this mission and that the 'credibility of the institute would be best served by his resignation.'"

A McGill spokesman said that Fortier would not be granting interviews and declined to answer questions beyond published statements from Fortier and [the institute](#).

Potter's [controversial *Maclean's* column](#), which was published Monday, offers a dim view of Quebec's society as lacking in social cohesion. Potter takes as his starting point for the piece the stranding of hundreds of cars on a Montreal highway during a snowstorm last week and argues that the stranding "reveals the essential malaise eating away at the foundations of Quebec society."

In making the case that, compared to the rest of Canada, "Quebec is an almost pathologically alienated and low-trust society, deficient in many of the most basic forms of social capital that other Canadians take for granted," Potter cites statistics related to volunteerism rates, civic engagement and social isolation; discusses the scale of the province's underground, cash-only economy; and describes the lack of "proper" uniforms worn by protesting police officers and the "on strike" stickers plastered on Quebec's emergency response vehicles as having a corroding effect on public trust in institutions.

Potter has apologized for parts of the column, saying in his resignation statement that "I deeply regret many aspects" of it, including "its sloppy use of anecdotes, its tone and the way it comes across as deeply critical of the entire province."

He previously issued an apology for what he described as "rhetorical flourishes that go beyond what is warranted by either the facts or my own beliefs," according to [the Montreal Gazette](#), which quoted from the earlier apology statement. *Maclean's* also issued two factual corrections.

"I think the op-ed itself was poorly executed, but that's beside the point, because academic freedom also means that researchers can be wrong," said Emmett Macfarlane, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Waterloo. "The proper forum for correcting errors is in scholarly or public debate, and that actually happened in this instance. But then suddenly he's issuing a resignation. I think that's a huge failure on the part of McGill administration."

Macfarlane wrote [a piece](#) that appeared in *Maclean's* characterizing a McGill University tweet distancing itself from Potter's views as "chilling." The tweet, below, was issued by the university's official account on Tuesday, prior to Potter's resignation.

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The views expressed by [@JAndrewPotter](#) in the [@MacleansMag](#) article do not represent those of [#McGill](#).

[2:54 PM - 21 Mar 2017](#)

"I think it's an outrage," Macfarlane said Thursday of Potter's resignation. "I think this is a real scandal for McGill University, which has completely failed to protect its core academic mission and the principle of academic freedom."

"Mr. Potter has been undoubtedly pressured at the very least to resign following the articulation of an unpopular and controversial argument in the public sphere," Macfarlane said.

“Academic freedom is expressly there to protect against that. Our ability to learn, to create knowledge as researchers, depends on our ability to examine things from a minority perspective, from an unpopular or outside-the-mainstream position. To have effectively sanctioned a scholar at their university for writing an op-ed that outraged people, that created obvious political pressure on the university, is an overt failure and violation of that principle.”

Michael Byers, the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia, also criticized McGill's response in [an op-ed in *The Globe and Mail*](#). "First, they publicly stated that Mr. Potter's views did not represent the university's views. But great universities do not have views. Instead, they provide a venue -- safe from prejudice and persecution -- in which intellectuals, including students, can gather to develop, debate and express knowledge, insights and opinions," Byers wrote.

"Second, by stating that Mr. Potter's views did not represent McGill's views, the administrators were implicitly criticizing him, at a time when he was already under intense public pressure to retract his column and apologize. A great university would have rushed to support his right to speak," Byers continued.

"Third, McGill allowed the controversy to become a resigning matter, thus turning a bad mistake into a scar on its reputation. The scar will be larger if it turns out that senior administrators pressured Mr. Potter into resigning. If they themselves succumbed to pressure from politicians or donors, the damage could be crippling."

Terry Hébert, the president of the McGill Association of University Teachers and a professor in the department of pharmacology and therapeutics, said that while he does not know the details of what happened, he is saddened that Potter resigned -- and he would be angered if he found out university administrators encouraged or compelled him to.

"I don't know what to make of his resignation," Hébert said. "I've asked people in the university if he was fired or encouraged to resign; the one person that I spoke with said no." That person is highly placed, Hébert said, "but they're not right at the top and they probably don't hear every discussion. I've asked the principal and the provost and I haven't heard from them, either. I think they're just hoping this whole thing will blow over."

"I would have thought the apology would have been sufficient, but I don't know him. I don't know how much self-regret there was there and how much he thought that this compromised his ability to do his job as the head of the institute. Only he knows that," Hébert said.

[A petition on Change.org](#) that originally called for Potter's firing -- which only received 24 signatures -- argued that his apology was insufficient given his role as director of an institute focused on the study of Canada. "We call on Principal Suzanne Fortier and the McGill Board of Governors to acknowledge that an institute with the mission of promoting understanding of Canada's pluralistic society and values cannot have a director who demonstrates prejudiced opinions and sloppy academic rigor in his approach to public dialogue and commentary," the

petition states. "The public attention that this incident has received will ultimately tarnish the reputation of the institute unless further action is taken."

Potter's column had come under fire from, among others, the province's highest political figure. Quebec's premier, Philippe Couillard, described it to reporters as "an article of very poor quality," [according to the CBC](#).

"It aims to paint a negative portrait of Quebec, based on prejudices," Couillard reportedly said. Potter came to McGill for what was to be a three-year term directing the institute in August 2016. A [university announcement](#) about his hiring cited his "reputation as a public intellectual in Canada and his experience as an editor at a major metropolitan newspaper," *The Ottawa Citizen*.

The university press release about Potter's hiring describes the institute's programs as follows: "The institute runs an academic program at McGill, supports an active research environment and organizes a variety of large-scale, public events on matters of interest to Canadians. These include MISC's annual conferences, which attract a great deal of attention from policy makers, media and the general public. While the institute itself is nonpartisan, MISC is no stranger to debate and controversy."

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