



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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27 March 2017

Suzanne Fortier
Principal and Vice-Chancellor
McGill University
Room 506, James Admin. Bldg.
845 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, Quebec H3A 0G4
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Dear Dr. Fortier,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), a national organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and reasoned and respectful debate. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

Our Society is concerned about the implications for academic freedom of McGill's decision to distance itself publicly from the opinions McGill professor Andrew Potter expressed in *Macleans*'s magazine.

As you know, on Tuesday 21 March, McGill posted on its official Twitter account a statement that read "The views expressed by @JAndrewPotter in the @MacleansMag article do not represent those of #McGill." This statement was in response to Professor Potter's article "How a snowstorm exposed Quebec's real problem: social malaise."

While we recognize that those holding administrative appointments within a university often need to indicate to their readers that they are not writing on behalf of their institution, universities can encourage candid and searching discussion and debate only if they neither penalize nor reward members of their community for the positions they take. Members of a university community should feel themselves free to accept or reject any idea solely on its merits, and not because it comports with prescribed views. With that tweet, however, McGill signaled that the opinions Dr Potter expressed are inappropriate or unwelcome. Such a signal can cause members of the community, especially students and junior professors, to refrain from saying what is on their minds or to pretend to accept views that they do not in fact hold.

To date, McGill has not commented on that tweet. We would like to know whether the university will withdraw it and apologize to the McGill community for interfering in the free flow of ideas and discussion.

We wish to emphasize the importance of this matter. It is conceivable that McGill's official repudiation of Dr Potter's article played a role in Dr Potter's decision to resign as the director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. The impression that it did will certainly stifle inquiry and discussion at McGill. Only by acknowledging the mistake the university made by trying to distance itself from one of its professor's articles can McGill begin to regain the trust of students and scholars.

SAFS looks forward to hearing from you. We will post this letter on our website. With your permission, we will be pleased to post your reply together with it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Mercer', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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Cc: Christopher P. Manfredi, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic)
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