

At McGill, Quebec's ultra-sensitivity meets academic cowardice with Andrew Potter's 'resignation'

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Wayne Cuddington/Postmedia News

Until Thursday morning, McGill University and Andrew Potter, director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and former editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, were stumbling down a rocky but well-worn path of scandal and outrage. Like Jan Wong did in the *Globe* on the topic of alienated minorities and mass shootings, and Martin Patriquin did in *Macleans* on the topic of rampant corruption, Potter wrote something critical about Canada's delicate flower province: he attempted to link last week's blizzard, and an ensuing hours-long standstill on a major highway, to a "malaise eating away at the foundations of Quebec society." And he and his employer were reaping the whirlwind.

There was predictable outrage in the nationalist tabloid *Journal de Montréal* ("Encore du Quebec bashing!"), and from the Premier and opposition leaders at the National Assembly. As is the style of the time, McGill saw fit to tweet that it didn't share Potter's views;

various academics angrily responded that universities aren't supposed to have "views" except that their professors are free to research and opine and err, the better to seek and maybe find the truth. Then came the obligatory grovelling: in a Facebook post, Potter, also an occasional contributor to this newspaper, disavowed certain parts of the column (and *Maclean's* appended some corrections to it) and apologized for "some rhetorical flourishes that go beyond what is warranted by either the facts or my own beliefs."

If it wasn't totally clear how this would end — Wong's career never recovered from the humiliation ritual; Patriquin and *Maclean's* were vindicated by events, though you'd never think so reading *Le Journal* this week — it was at least all going to script. But then something special happened, something no one seems to have called for publicly: Potter offered what sounded like a very involuntary "resignation," and McGill accepted it.

"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," Potter wrote in a statement published on Facebook Thursday morning. "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. "

Ha, ha, no. This most certainly will not best serve the credibility of the Institute, or that of McGill, which can go ahead and take me off its alumni mailing lists. It is mortifying for both. Potter will retain his professorship in the Faculty of Arts, as opposed to his administrative role at MISC, and if the McGill administration wanted to compound its disgrace it could attempt to cast that as a defence of academic freedom. It would be better off hiding under the bed. And outraged Quebecers would do well to take a look in the mirror.

By Potter's own admission, the piece wasn't his best work: Quebec's underground economy is big; the police won't wear proper uniforms as part of a labour protest; and on communitarian indicators like volunteerism and trust among fellow citizens, Quebec scores poorly, he observed. "And then a serious winter storm hits, and there is social breakdown at every stage," he posited. "A few truckers refuse to let the towers move them off the highway, and there's no one in charge to force them to move. The road is blocked, hundreds of cars are abandoned, and some people spend the entire night in their cars, out of gas with no one coming to help."

As many politely observed, it was an awful stretch. As a perceived outsider, Potter certainly should have known the very premise would cause him grief, never mind its inartful execution. For the sake of argument, let's call it a terrible column. But for God's sake, we're talking about a big, beautiful province of eight million people that's improbably and safely francophone more than 400 years after Champlain named it and more than 250 after Wolfe bested Montcalm on

the Plains of Abraham. Quebec has everything that matters going for it and huge room to grow, and its chattering classes can't let a bad bloody column slide off their backs. Nor can McGill, which fancies itself a very fine academic institution indeed, find the gonads not to bust down a professor because of a rote backlash in which nobody was publicly demanding it. (If it caved to behind-the-scenes pressure, it's all the more shameful.)

Quebec is Canada's most sensitive province (as *Maclean's* might put it). Academic freedom ain't what it used to be. That much, we knew. But this is a whole new disturbing mashup of the two. Under its next director, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada might usefully inquire into what just happened here — though it might not survive the publication of its findings.