

# McGill principal denies rumours that political interference was behind academic's resignation

**JOSEPH BREAN** | March 23, 2017 9:00 PM ET

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McGill University is refusing to explain or answer questions after the shock resignation of the director of its prestigious Institute for the Study of Canada.

Andrew Potter, an author, philosopher and former Ottawa Citizen editor-in-chief who left journalism last year for a return to academia, said in a statement posted to Facebook Thursday morning that he offered to resign after being branded a bigot by politicians for a magazine column he wrote which criticized Quebec society in light of the poor handling of a recent snowstorm.

In a note to the McGill community Thursday night, principal Suzanne Fortier said Potter's resignation was accepted "regretfully" by the Institute's board. She described concerns about political meddling in university matters as "unfounded rumours."

But the controversy so obviously involved a threat to academic and journalistic freedoms that the president of the McGill Association of University Teachers said he, personally, would have refused Potter's resignation in such circumstances.

"I totally disagree with what he said, but I totally think he should have the right to say it," said Terry Hébert, who is also a professor of pharmacology and therapeutics.

Maclean's first posted Potter's column Monday evening. A day later, in a note published to Facebook and appended to the column Potter himself expressed regret for its "sloppy use of anecdotes, its tone, and the way it comes across as deeply critical of the entire province." "That should have been the end of it," Hébert said, favourably noting some voices in the Quebec media who were content to dismiss the column as a "brain fart."

But it was not the end. The column was swiftly condemned in the National Assembly, and by Quebec's Premier.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's an article of very poor quality," said Philippe Couillard, a former neurosurgeon who was also a professor and director of research in health law at McGill. "It aims to paint a negative portrait of Quebec, based on prejudices."

This echoed a political perception common in Quebec, where offence is often taken to what are perceived as frequent and sweeping generalizations made about the province in the English media.

“It’s about time,” said Quebec finance minister Carlos Leitao on Thursday, upon hearing that Potter had apologized for the column, according to CBC reporter Ryan Hicks.

Before Potter resigned, Canada’s heritage minister Mélanie Joly said she understood his comments were “unacceptable,” and that it was right for him to recognize this, but that she would not comment on corrective action because she respects the independence of journalists.

On Twitter, Gerald Butts — principal secretary to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and, like the prime minister, a McGill alumnus — denied that anybody from the Prime Minister’s Office had contacted the university about Potter’s column. “As a graduate and former Governor (of the university), I think McGill made a mistake in not defending Andrew’s freedom of expression.” Couillard’s spokesman Harold Fortin denied that there had been any contact between the Premier and the McGill administration regarding Potter, his column, and his directorship.

And Catherine Maurice, director of communications for Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, said: “We did not contact McGill University at all regarding Mr. Potter and his piece in Maclean’s magazine. Not the mayor. Not anyone from his office.”

The Canadian Association of University Teachers said it contacted McGill Thursday, “seeking clarity” about what led to Potter’s resignation. “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,” CAUT executive director David Robinson said in a statement. “Universities have an absolute obligation to protect and defend the academic freedom of their faculty from outside influences.”

In her note Thursday night, Fortier emphasized the school’s respect for academic freedom. She refused to be interviewed, however, and a spokesman would say nothing more than what was in a public statement issued Thursday morning to announce Potter’s resignation.

“The mission of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada is to promote a better understanding of Canada through the study of our heritage; to develop a clearer understanding of Canada’s social, political and economic future; to identify and explore the benefits that a pluralistic society offers and to support the study of Canada across the country and internationally,” the statement read. “The Board wishes to recognize Mr. Potter’s contribution to the Institute. Among his various achievements, he organized numerous conferences and strengthened the participation of Indigenous leaders and communities.”

The Post was not able to reach any member of the institute’s board for comment.

The statement said Potter will continue as an Associate Professor (Professional) in the Faculty of Arts, and Potter himself said he hopes “to serve the school in any place I might be effective.” Potter also declined to be interviewed. His statement described the directorship as his “dream job of a lifetime,” and said he is “heartbroken that the situation has evolved the way it has.”

“The issue is perhaps more sensitive than Andrew recognized,” said Desmond Morton, an historian and past director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. Morton said he also wrote columns in the press as part of his academic job, and “certainly didn’t send articles down to be vetted by someone at university headquarters.

“In an institution like a university, the extent of free speech is pretty extensive, in principle, and any decent university recognizes that,” Morton said. “On the other hand, the university is serving a minority of Quebecers, a minority of Canadians, and therefore is vulnerable to criticism, but so are we all.”

But, Morton said said McGill “has a long and very dubious record of internal management on issues like that.”

He cited the expulsion of the constitutional scholar Eugene Forsey and the shabby treatment of scholar and poet Frank Scott for their unpopular political opinions and participation in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the predecessor to the NDP.

The whole affair reveals a danger of university life, Morton said: that when people who would get rid of academics for saying unpopular things get their first taste of victory, “their appetite for more control is not yet fulfilled.”

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