

Protesters crash controversial U of T prof's appearance

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Protesters threw glitter, blew horns and tried to shout down University of Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson Friday as he spoke about free speech and political correctness at McMaster University.

"This was by far the most contentious event that I've been to," Peterson said. "They did everything they could to shut it down."

Peterson — who was invited to speak at McMaster — has sparked controversy by refusing to use gender-neutral pronouns, such as ze and zir, and by denouncing political correctness run amok in post secondary institutions.

Hadhy Ayaz, a third-year student at the university and director of Overcome the Gap McMaster which organized the event, said most of the crowd came to hear the professor speak but about 15-20 protesters crashed the room, blew air horns, played loud instruments and threw glitter onto Peterson.

"They were shouting slurs at Dr. Peterson," Ayaz said. "We weren't able to run the event at all as intended. It's really disappointing."

He said students had made a point of telling people they were welcome to protest peacefully outside.

Peterson spoke for about half hour and then went outside to address students.

The event was originally envisioned as a panel but the other professors scheduled to appear with Peterson dropped out after a barrage of online attacks, Ayaz said.

Organizers received a "very passionate and hostile response" from student groups and others when they first proposed the event, he said.

"I personally started receiving messages on Facebook...members of our club started being harassed," Ayaz said. "And kind of threats were made against our organization saying, 'You know if you bring this person, ie Dr. Peterson, on campus then you will be labelled as bigots, as transphobic and... of course our club, we don't condone any of that.'"

The university administration assured organizers it would be appropriate to hold such a panel, he said.

After they started advertising the event this week, someone posted contact information for the three other panelists and urged supporters to pressure them into backing out, he said.

“Very soon after that I received e-mails from the panelists saying, ‘We’ve sort of been bombarded with e-mails and we no longer feel comfortable being on this panel,’” Ayaz said. “And they unfortunately decided to pull out.”

One student group posted about Peterson on Facebook: “We stand in opposition to him and in solidarity with LGBTQ2S* students everywhere.”

The Toronto Sun asked Peterson, who still plans to go ahead with a speaking engagement at Western Ontario Saturday, about the controversy.

What happened to the McMaster University “panel?”

“What they’ve told me so far is that they had posted the talk up on Facebook and the discussion about its propriety became very contentious...I think it’s another example of how people are learning to use bullying techniques to stop discussion about topics they feel shouldn’t be discussed.”

What was so contentious about this particular topic?

“I don’t think anything was contentious about it except, perhaps, the fact that I was invited...I don’t think that I’ve said anything particular contentious except that I wouldn’t use these horrible pronouns that are confusing and poorly thought through...but that’s made me a lightning rod of some sort for people who are looking for someone to complain about.”

Posting contact information? Are these panel members being targeted? Do you feel targeted?

“For some reason, and this is something that’s very strange, I’ve received virtually no negative email...There’s been petitions about me and so forth obviously, and there’s still plenty of those being produced, but in terms of personal negative e-mails the number I’ve received I could count on the fingers of one hand...I certainly haven’t felt targeted.”

“I don’t know the details of what made (the panel members) decide to withdraw. But I think that the unfortunate thing for them, and I’m certainly not commenting on their motivations or anything about them...but I do know it’s a very dangerous thing to withdraw when threatened because you teach yourself that you’re the sort of person who will withdraw when threatened and you encourage and empower — a word I hate by the way — you encourage the people who are persecuting you because you don’t put up a limit. Many people who push a radical agenda of any sort will continue to push until they hit a barrier of some sort because they don’t have any internal limits.”

People are entitled to criticize your position, but why would that cause others to just back away?

“It doesn’t take much to intimidate people into silence. People don’t like to be singled out as individuals and pointed to as responsible. People will back off very, very rapidly if you do that to them...People do not like trouble and they’re far more likely to withdraw than hold their ground or to advance.”