

# McMaster debate with controversial professor Jordan Peterson disrupted by activists

## Professors set to engage Peterson backed out, one citing inadequate security preparations

By Dave Beatty, [CBC News](#) Posted: Mar 19, 2017 7:42 PM ET Last Updated: Mar 20, 2017 7:30 AM ET

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/mcmaster-debate-with-controversial-professor-jordan-peterson-disrupted-by-activists-1.4031843>

*Jordan Peterson is a psychology professor at the University of Toronto. He has become a controversial figure for his opinions about referring to trans and non-binary people according to their physical sex, as opposed to their stated gender identity.*

A debate scheduled at McMaster on Friday, featuring the controversial Jordan Peterson, turned into a fracas after the other debaters declined to take part, and the event became a noisy confrontation between Peterson and his critics.

Ultimately, Peterson left after roughly an hour of trying to speak over and in between the activists who were there to drown him out.

The debate was set up by a student group with the intention to discuss freedom of speech and political correctness, especially in academic settings.

'When the door to the classroom opened, over a hundred people just rushed into the room.' - Hadhy Ayaz, student and debate organizer

Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, became a leading figure of contention in this arena when he began speaking out publicly against what he calls "compelled speech."

An example of this is being expected to interact with transgender and non-binary students according to their stated gender identity. Peterson told the CBC in a radio interview he does not recognize another person's right to determine what pronouns he uses to address them.

He has also spoken about his concerns with the threat to free speech contained within the proposed Bill C-16, which would make it illegal to discriminate under the basis of gender identity or expression.

Peterson's unpopular views have earned him a train of protestors wherever he goes, and that train pulled into Hamilton on Friday when the professor showed up on McMaster campus.

## **The silence and the noise**

Hadhy Ayaz, a third year global health student, is the director of political action in a student group called Overcome the Gap. The group's leadership decided to organize a debate about political correctness and free speech in academia, because they judged it to be a relevant conversation for students. Ayaz said it was planned even before the group became aware of Dr. Peterson.

"We were able to get what we believe was a very nuanced panel," said Ayaz. "Most of them disagreed with Dr. Peterson on several things."

However, before the debate, two of the professors, Dr. Liyakat Takim and Dr. Matthew Grellete backed out of the arrangement. Ayaz said the professors mentioned receiving critical emails, and he believes that's what discouraged their participation. Both of these professors declined CBC Hamilton's request for comment.

Dr. Philippa Carter, a professor of religious studies at the university, was to be the third panelist from McMaster.

She told CBC News she received some polite emails discouraging her from the debate, but what changed her mind and led her to bow out with her colleagues was realizing the organizers had, in her view, made inadequate preparations in regard to security.

So instead of a debate, the event became a Jordan Peterson talk.

"When the door to the classroom opened," Ayaz said, "over a hundred people just rushed into the room. They were blocking the fire exits."

"I hate to say I told you so," said Carter.

## **Disruptions expected**

Peterson was at the front of the room attempting to speak to the people who had come to hear him, but the crowd of disrupters, which Ayaz estimates at around 20, made that very difficult with shouting and various noisemakers. He said at one point a woman approached and blew an air horn near Peterson's head.

"I told security I fully expected disruptions," said Ayaz.

"They were very clear to us that they wouldn't tolerate that kind of disruption."

But when it came down to it, said Ayaz, the four or five uniformed officers in the room were unhelpful in letting the event proceed as planned.

Gord Arbeau, a media representative from McMaster, told the CBC in an email that the security personnel's conduct reflects the school's commitment to the right to protest.

"Had there been concerns about personal safety, we are confident that our security officers would have taken appropriate action," said Arbeau.

"In cases where formal complaints have been made as a result of this event, the University will investigate these through the Student Code of Conduct."

Eventually, Dr. Peterson walked outside to continue speaking, where he was surrounded by a mix of listeners and critics who continued to shout him down before he finally told Ayaz he was done.

A cellphone video captured by fourth year student Ali Yazdankia has been widely viewed on Facebook. It shows the second leg of Peterson's talk, when he was outside, speaking both to and over the crowd surrounding him. (Ali Yazdankia/Facebook)

### **Challenging the status quo**

A statement was released by a coalition of student groups, faculty, and staff that opposed Peterson speaking at McMaster in the first place. It defends against the accusation that they are proving Peterson's point about censorship by attempting to silence him.

"The concept of freedom of speech has most often been mobilized to protect specifically counter-hegemonic ideas, ideas that actually challenge, rather than reiterate, the status quo."

The statement continues, "there is nothing rebellious or revolutionary about insisting on the naturalness of the (now long-debunked) gender binary."

The debate around Jordan Peterson being allowed to speak reflects an ongoing conversation, and what some have described as a "culture war" where the line between free speech and oppressive speech is fiercely contested. Many people communicated similar sentiment at a **protest and counter-protest revolving around Bill C-16** earlier in March outside of city hall. People there on all sides expressed fear of reprisal from their opponents.

Echoing that fear were a few of the people who organized this protest, refusing to be named when spoken to by CBC, citing the vitriol and violent fantasies they see online from posters in support of Peterson.

One leader of the protest against Peterson is Maya Gordo, who will begin studying political science at McMaster in the fall and is already involved in campus life.

"We understand the importance of debate and discourse," said Gordo. And in that spirit, the groups that organized it are considering planning their own event.

"We hope this can be an event that doesn't invite someone like Jordan Peterson, who denies the personhood and violates the safety of trans and non-binary students and community members," Gordo said.

Dr. Carter stressed that although she is an "ardent defender" of free speech, especially in academic settings, she does not agree with Dr. Peterson's views when it comes to respecting trans-gendered peoples' pronoun choices, nor does she agree with his criticism of Bill C-16.

"It's the wrong hill to die on," she said.

**[dave.beatty@cbc.ca](mailto:dave.beatty@cbc.ca) | [@dbeatty](https://twitter.com/dbeatty)**