

Mac urged not to give green light to hecklers following Jordan Peterson protest

March 17 protest directed at University of Toronto professor, invited to speak on political correctness and free speech

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Rene Johnston, Toronto Star

[Hamilton Spectator](#)

By [Andrew Dreschel](#)

An advocacy group for academic freedom is concerned McMaster University president Patrick Deane has given student protesters a green light to disrupt speaking events.

The group fears Deane has effectively given activists permission to shut down events by stating the university won't remove them except in the most extreme cases.

Mark Mercer, president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, was responding to an open letter posted by Deane concerning a recent speech by a controversial visiting professor that was cut short by chanting protesters who clanged cowbells and blew airhorns.

But Deane says his letter to the university didn't intend to suggest it was "open season" on speakers and, in fact, administrators are taking steps to guard against future unruly disruptions.

"We're going to put a group together to think about having a standing protocol for handling these kinds of issues because I think certainly (the disruption) wasn't what we would want to see."

The March 17 protest by about 20 hecklers was directed at University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson, who was invited by a campus group to speak on political correctness and free speech.

Peterson, who has gained notoriety for refusing to use gender-neutral pronouns for transgender and gender nonconforming people, argues gender is a biological fact not a social construct.

Deane's letter expressed regret for the Peterson incident, affirmed support for academic freedoms, and promised action if protest tactics break the law or university codes of conduct.

But Mercer's free speech antenna tingled when Deane went on to say "our commitment to academic freedom requires that, except in the most extreme cases, the cancellation of events, or the exclusion or removal of particular individuals will not be our response."

In a letter to Deane, Mercer said that stance confers a "de facto hecklers' veto" on disruptive protesters and "is an open invitation to protesters to shut down events through obstreperous behaviour."

Mercer said in an interview his group upholds the right to protest but disruptive behaviour should not be tolerated and Deane's statement emboldens those disposed to stop speakers they don't like.

But perhaps even a university president may sometimes struggle to find the right words. Deane says he can see why Mercer, who chairs the department of philosophy at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, is troubled but he didn't intend to declare open season on controversial speakers.

"I don't think what happened (to Peterson) was desirable and the university is certainly not going to give hecklers a de facto veto of that sort," Deane said.

"What I was meaning to suggest was I think it's a sensitive thing to allow people to express their feelings through protest, but the important point, which would be Mercer's own point, is to allow them to do that without it becoming an impediment to the freedom of the other person to speak."

Deane says Mac strives to find a balance between protecting free speech and preserving the right of protesters to express themselves, but it didn't get the balance right during the Peterson event.

According to Deane, a post-mortem discovered some of the protesters were not from Mac and that the security on hand may not have had the capacity to intervene.

"I think the expectation was that there would not be protest on that scale, or, even if it was in those numbers, perhaps not protesting in that way."

Deane notes Peterson's room only became available shortly before the event, which made it hard to "choreograph" security responses.

"I know when we've had controversial speakers before, a great deal of effort goes into preparing the room and controlling access to the room and the speed which people go in and what they can bring with them, for example."

So do we chalk this up to a learning experience for Mac?

"I would say," said Deane. "Absolutely."



Andrew Dreschel's commentary appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
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