

# The lesson of Lindsay Shepherd

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In a Sept. 26 *McGill Tribune* *article*, I worried that Professor Andrew Potter's hushed "resignation" last year as director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada set an ominous precedent for students' rights of free expression. Two months later, Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) has made national press for attempting to quietly censor a graduate student. When teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd screened a *debate on "non-traditional" pronouns* that included University of Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson for her communication studies class, her supervisor, Professor Nathan Rambukkana, accused her of creating "a *toxic climate*" and committing "*gendered violence*." In taking such a hardline stance against what was undisputedly an academic exercise, WLU has shown a troubling disrespect for free expression, as well as students' critical faculties.

Shepherd disagrees with Jordan Peterson and *identifies as a "leftist."* As she *explained in a meeting with her supervisor* and in *subsequent media coverage*, she presented the debate neutrally, as academic material. But, according to her supervisor, Professor Rambukkana, this was beside the point. Showing Peterson's views was equivalent to promoting them, because students might not have the critical skills to "unpack" Peterson's views, and come to conclusions Rambukkana finds acceptable.

"These are very young students," Rambukkana said, "and something of that nature is not appropriate to that age of student."

This idea is as misguided as it is condescending. Students come to university to grow as thinkers and hone their critical faculties, but this doesn't mean they haven't wrestled with controversial ideas before. As Rambukkana knows, Peterson has a significant following on his *YouTube* and *Twitter* channels, where his opinions aren't accompanied by any critical context. Shepherd's class wasn't an "unsafe" space to discuss them—it was far safer than most, offering a guarantee that ad-hominem attacks and personal insults were off-

limits. Students drawn to fields like communications studies have already shown an interest in analyzing ideas. They deserve more respect than Rambukkana's comments show them. Banishing ideas from the classroom doesn't make them go away. At a time when we're beginning to realize that **prohibition doesn't always mean eradication**, it's disappointing to see such regressive policy alive and well.

## Debate is not the enemy; it's the vehicle for testing legitimacy.

The "critical toolkit" that Rambukkana mentions isn't learned in a lecture, but in practice. Universities know this: Virtually all classes in the social sciences and humanities include tutorials, like Shepherd's, so students can learn by doing. These skills are built by engaging with real issues. Moreover, there's no reason to fear that the principles of inclusion and equality will be mortally wounded by critically examining a debate. They are robust principles. This is true not because of any professor's edict, but because of the efforts of those who have listened to, argued against, and, ultimately, **debunked** Peterson's views. Debate is not the enemy; it's the vehicle for testing legitimacy. Despite the ups and downs along the way, it's a test trans rights can—and ultimately will—pass.

The student complaint (or complaints, the number is "confidential") that began the affair came from a student in her class who felt "threatened" by the discussion. I don't doubt that they did. Hearing views that challenge one's beliefs is always difficult. **It's how we're wired**. It's no doubt even harder when those issues resonate personally. But the right response isn't to stop having discussions. As Shepherd points out in the now-infamous meeting, people like Peterson are "really out there." Like it or not, their ideas influence the world we live in; ignoring them won't make them go away. And, yes, confronting them is hard—for trans people and others targeted by Peterson's rhetoric, harder than I can fully understand—but it's the only way to discredit them. Effectively confronting misguided ideas requires first understanding their rationale, however flawed it might be.