

JORDAN PETERSON AND LACK OF SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Stephen Perrott

It is too early to say just what the lasting effect will be of the Jordan Peterson pronoun controversy on free speech and academic freedom in the Canadian university. The latest news is that the rebroadcast of the University of Toronto Pronoun Debate, scheduled for CBC Radio's *Ideas* on January 8th, has just been cancelled due to concerns about the other panelists having been harassed after the initial event. I am inclined to believe that harassment did occur, though not simply on the say-so of Peterson's opponents. His opponents are, after all, the crowd who, without basis, accuse Peterson of hate speech and racism; simply espousing a contrary opinion is enough to generate cries of harassment. Whatever the reality, the law provides mechanisms for addressing criminal harassment and it is an ominous sign when the national broadcaster self-censors itself from informing the public of an important and debatable matter because of the bad behaviour of some citizens.

Although Peterson's situation at the University of Toronto seemed precarious in the early days of the controversy, Peterson has now garnered public support (including 16,318 signatories to an online petition) at a level likely to generate caution in the mind of any flip-flopping administrator considering disciplinary action. Widespread international press coverage has given Peterson celebrity status and he looks forward to debating "new atheist" Sam Harris later this month. Having grown his YouTube channel base to 1,120 subscribers, both admirers and detractors believe he has a secure financial future even were he to leave the University of Toronto.

Peterson might be ok, but the same cannot be said of the academy. Should we be surprised, as lamented by Frances Widdowson in the *Ottawa Citizen* at the height of the controversy, that almost none of Peterson's support has come from within the academy? Other than a particularly tepid comment from a member of CAUT's Executive, the only organizational support within the academy has come from SAFS. In addition to Widdowson (Membership Coordinator, SAFS), Janice Fiamengo (a SAFS Director) offered a passionate video plea for collegial support and devoted one of her Fiamengo Files to the matter. Public support seems to run out beyond SAFS, unfortunately, with the exception of Concordia's iconoclastic Gad Saad. To my knowledge, that's the extent of academic support—or, as Gad might offer, this is the Saad Truth.

We should not be surprised that none among the growing number of ideologues embracing divisive identity politics has anything to say in defence of Peterson's academic freedom. After all, many academics have become quite open and brazen about not valuing free speech and they would be quite happy to maintain momentum in the building of their "post-fact" world. (Who could have imagined even a few years ago that there would academics claiming, without first crossing their fingers, that there is no reality to biological sex?) In a perhaps twisted way, these true believers are the least culpable when it comes to not supporting academic freedom.

There are also, I suspect, a fair number of Canadian professors who, despite being inclined to support academic freedom, find themselves turned off by Peterson's views, his demeanor, or

both. Perhaps they are waiting for a purer topic and a different messenger to carry the academic freedom banner. They, perhaps, have not attended sufficiently to Peterson's arguments but, in any case, they have missed the big picture. Yes, the debate around Peterson concerns sexual- and gender-identity and respect for transgender people, but these are just two of the issues at stake. Questions about academic freedom, freedom of expression, and administrative oversight of how we talk with each other also need to be addressed, and can be done so independently of sex or gender.

Certainly, many, perhaps even the majority of, Canadian professors understand Peterson's arguments clearly and have a solid grasp on what is at stake. This is the "I'm alright Jack" crowd, who may claim that they could have predicted the wave of anger, name-calling, and threats to job security that engulfed Peterson when he released the three notorious YouTube videos. They won't speak up now because they are not personally affected by this matter and precisely because they do not want the torrents of acrimony directed at Peterson turned on them. They may claim to value free speech and academic freedom, but not to the point that they are willing to place any of their "social virtue" at risk.

Despite my opening contention that it is too early to tell, I am inclined to think that this controversy sounds a death knell for the central mission of Canadian universities. Social psychological research is clear about the powerful influence that the single rebel may have in freeing others to push back from an undesirable state of conformity. Peterson is that rebel and he has endured the worst of the knocks that come with challenging orthodoxy. Follow him or not in his refusal to use non-standard pronouns, we all bear responsibility to support his demand that universities set no rules about what pronouns we use. For by supporting this demand we defend the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression we purport to hold dear. What lack of support for Peterson's demand clearly shows is that if we do in fact value the central tenets of university life, then the Canadian professoriate does not possess the courage of its convictions.

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