



President's Advisory
Committee on Building
an Inclusive Community
(PACBIC)

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Statement re: McMaster Event Featuring Dr. Jordan Peterson (Professor of Psychology, University of Toronto)

We are deeply troubled that Dr. Jordan Peterson has been invited to speak at McMaster at an upcoming event about “freedom of speech” and “political correctness.” Most recently, Dr. Peterson has gained notoriety for his refusal to use the preferred pronouns of trans- and gender-non-conforming colleagues and students at U of T, defending his callous disregard for their personhood through a misguided deference to his freedom of speech and his distaste for “political correctness.” But freedom of speech doesn’t now, and hasn’t ever, meant that we can or should be able to say whatever we like in public spaces regardless of the impact of our speech on others. Instead, 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. Freedom of speech was also not conceived as a means to protect normative ideas from contestation by marginalized communities, but to protect those whose speech might actually contest normative or nationalist ideals from censure, punishment, or retaliation by state forces. There is nothing rebellious or revolutionary about insisting on the naturalness of the (now long debunked) gender binary or of what Dr. Peterson describes as the “biological fact” of sexual difference neatly categorizable as ‘male’ and ‘female’ (a “fact” subjected to intense critique, questioning and reconsideration by numerous scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and even the biological sciences for several decades now, which demonstrates the limited extent of Dr. Peterson’s knowledge on this subject, since he seems either entirely unaware of this body of literature or else unwilling to engage with the challenge it poses for his own arguments). There is nothing subversive or radical about suggesting that one ought to be entitled to read the complexities of gendered identification on the basis of a quick and unwanted scrutiny of others’ bodies and appearance. This is not a freedom that needs to be defended but rather the simplistic re-assertion of the status quo, of ideas about gender and sexual difference that have become and stubbornly remain very widespread and common-sensical even in the face of mountains of academic evidence to the contrary and legislative changes made to protect the human rights of trans and gender-non-conforming persons.

So let us not pretend that Dr. Peterson is a staunch defender of any sort of “freedom” – what he is defending, instead, appears to be his misguided presumption that his right to uphold the status quo trumps the rights of others to exist in public spaces and be treated with respect and dignity, free from hatred and discrimination. And in a world where hate and discrimination continue to flourish and appear to be on the rise, his way of expressing his right amounts to a presumptive sense of entitlement to deny others their status as fully and complexly human. There is nothing new about Dr. Peterson’s position, then — it is a position taken by multitudes of others before him. There is also little to be gained by debating Dr. Peterson because he presents no argument founded on evidence that would actually be worthy of debate — unless one is of the view that certain people *are* less than fully and complexly human, of course, and are deserving of being treated with callous disregard for their personhood in public spaces, in which case such views –

because they rest on faulty evidence, and because they stand directly in the way of the substantive inclusion of marginalized communities in our public institutions – are deeply unsettling, and require critical questioning and contestation whenever and wherever they are articulated.

We stand in solidarity with trans and gender-non-conforming members of our communities who have been called upon repeatedly in the last several months to publicly respond to and challenge Dr. Peterson's views, and to articulate again and again why they should be able to participate fully and meaningfully in public institutions in ways that reflect their humanity. We anticipate that Dr. Peterson's talk will – and should – result in public, critical opposition to his ideas, including public opposition to how he has treated trans and gender-non-conforming people, which may take the form of public protest. In the present climate, proponents of free speech may try to paint such opposition as just another indicator that Dr. Peterson's freedom of speech is in fact under threat. Instead, we suggest that wherever free speech is valued, protest too must be valued as a legitimate exercise of that freedom. But protest does more than this: it also aims to articulate and demand the kind of university and the kind of society many of us are fighting for, one in which we recognize that speech or action that reduces the humanity of any group of people is not an exercise of freedom, but instead poses a threat to us all.

Statement issued by:

The President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community's Priorities and Planning Committee & LGBTQ+ Working Group

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