

Free speech in Canada: It was bad five years ago. Do you think it's gotten better since?

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Is free speech under attack, on Canadian campuses and in society at large? The National Post has a new documentary exploring this very issue. In the coming weeks, a series of essays in these pages will explore that same issue. Today, Barbara Kay examines “cancel culture” on Canadian campuses. To view the documentary, please go to [NationalPost.com/freespeech](http://NationalPost.com/freespeech). What is behind cancel culture on campus? A shift in the university's sense of its mission. The mission of free inquiry has been sublimated to the mission of social justice. For many decades, Yale University said that its purpose was “to create, preserve and disseminate knowledge.” Then, in 2016, Yale's president announced a new mission, which no longer mentions “knowledge.” Instead, Yale is officially “committed to improving the world” by educating aspiring leaders, not only through research as in the past, but through “practice.” What does that loaded word, “practice,” signify? It signifies ideology over inquiry, activism over erudition, illiberalism in the name of equity over intellectual freedom. All of which leads to cancel culture. It signifies ideology over inquiry, activism over erudition (--image--)

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From a cornucopia of options, I have chosen three Canadian examples of cancel culture that struck me as especially unsettling in their implications. • Liberal Arts College is a small independent college embedded within Concordia University in Montreal. In May, the administration cancelled a slated graduation keynote address by political philosopher Harvey Mansfield, author of the book *Manliness*, and professor of government at Harvard University, where he has worked since 1962. LAC has for 40 years been a bastion of classical liberal values, committed to free inquiry, with a core curriculum based in the great canon of Western civilization. It is one of the few colleges in Canada where political correctness is consciously and conscientiously opposed, and where the free exchange of ideas is a pillar of its mission. LAC has for 40 years been a bastion of classical liberal values, committed to free inquiry (--image--)

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Retired founder and longtime LAC principal Fred Krantz said in an interview about the cancellation that he had believed LAC was “immune to the wave of politically correct ideology sweeping many North American campuses.” Yet a handful of alumni expressing their opposition to Mansfield because of his feminism-critical views (not the subject of his address) was enough to make the new president renege on the invitation. So my feeling about this particular incident was one of special discouragement. The protesting alumni hadn't been indoctrinated or cowed into submission by social justice warriors at Berkeley. They were graduates of a program dedicated to inculcating a commitment to free academic inquiry. Yet their solid education in the classical liberal tradition was no prophylactic against an illiberal zeitgeist. Cancel culture can, it seems, be taken in by osmosis. Cancel culture can, it seems, be taken in by osmosis (--image--)

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• My second example is the University of Victoria's recent decision to not renew the contract of adjunct professor Susan Crockford, a zoologist with an expertise in polar bears. Crockford was also on UVic's Speakers Bureau list, and would regularly give talks to schools and community groups, but was removed from that role as well. What was her crime? Apparently wrongthink on climate change. Crockford shattered a popular climate-change myth by reporting that polar bear populations are not plummeting as a result of shrinking Arctic ice. In fact, polar bear numbers are stable and even rising. The polar bears are there, masses of them, and in fact the federal government, if you've noticed, has stopped public grieving about their disappearance, because the Inuit gave them an earful on the subject. They were angry that their own testimony — they are the ones who actually live with the polar bears — was being ignored. So Crockford was not disseminating false news, but reporting actual news that didn't reinforce the received wisdom on climate change. Which is why I found the polar bear story especially disturbing. It's one thing to fire a teacher who promotes theories or hypotheses the university disagrees with, though that would be wrong as well. This isn't the case with Crockford's non-renewal. After all, polar bear numbers have nothing to do with racism, sexism or transphobia, the usual grounds for cancel culture. (--image--)

The University of Victoria has decided to not renew the contract of adjunct professor Susan Crockford, a zoologist with an expertise in polar bears, who has reported that polar bear populations are not plummeting as a result of shrinking Arctic ice, and that polar bear numbers are in fact stable.

• My final example arises from my participation in the 2014 Macdonald-Laurier Institute’s Great Canadian Debate series. The resolution was “Free speech in Canadian universities is an endangered species.” I naturally took the affirmative side, and my opponent was Daniel Drache of York University’s political science dept. What he had to say was, I believe, representative of the progressive mindset. He began by asking the question: “Does every crackpot, eccentric, provocateur or bona fide activist have a right to speak on campus?” Drache sincerely believes that the people who have been de-platformed are not only small numerically — about 23 a year he says out of about 2,000 invited speakers a year across Canada — but also that most of them hold views that are so dumb or outrageous or offensive or dangerous that their de-platforming is an insignificant price to pay for the racial and gender diversity the modern university can boast of. He said that for those who are eager to hear these crackpots and eccentrics, they can find them on the Internet. A free speech wall is in fact tangible proof (of the problem) (--image--)

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For my part, I made all the points you would expect from someone defending freedom of speech. But afterward, when we were socializing at a reception, Drache told me that there was only one argument I had made to which he felt vulnerable as a progressive. It was my comment following my observation that in 2013 a free-speech wall built by Students for Liberty at Queens University had been removed on the grounds of “offensive content.” I had said: “‘Free speech wall?’ Ominous doublespeak. Free speech walls emerged in authoritarian societies like China, because there was no freedom of speech, and citizens quite reasonably feared speaking truth to power. That there is an entire generation of Canadian students who think a free speech wall, one tiny corner of the campus approved for anonymously written incorrect thoughts, is something they should be grateful for — well, this is pathetic. A free speech wall is in fact tangible proof (of the problem). It saddens me and scares me more than a little, too.” Well, I said that in 2014. Have things gotten better since? This column was adapted from remarks to be given on Nov. 13 at the “What’s Wrong with Cancel Culture? Free Inquiry in an Age of Outrage” event in Calgary. • Email: [kaybarb@gmail.com](mailto:kaybarb@gmail.com) | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](https://twitter.com/BarbaraRKay)

Beyond Jordan Peterson: A National Post investigation into the state of free speech on campuses