

How a 'Pronoun' Class Got a Young Canadian Academic Censured

It was an unseasonably hot November in Canada after the curtain between free speech and hate speech caught fire at an Ontario university. The incident at Wilfrid Laurier University has since gained [international attention](#), inflaming longstanding debates over the purposes and parameters of higher education.

As the fallout continues to grow, however, and old positions harden, we might do well to keep in mind the specific laws and values that not only made the Laurier incident inevitable, but also doom it to happen many times again.

Early in November, 22-year-old graduate student Lindsay Shepherd was called into a meeting with her supervisor and two other university officials. Its purpose was to address anonymous complaints made by one or more students about material Shepherd had presented in a recent classroom discussion on gender-neutral pronouns.

As a teaching assistant, Shepherd hosts a tutorial section of a first-year Communications class—Canadian Communication in Context—and had screened a brief , [year-old clip of a debate](#) from The Agenda, a current affairs program on Ontario public television channel TVO (essentially Ontario's PBS, which also airs Sesame Street, Antiques Roadshow, and spelling bee championships.)

The debate clip featured University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson, whose stance against gender neutral pronouns has made him an international figurehead of resistance against social justice extremism. Shepherd, a self-described leftist, said she screened the clip because

Peterson's ideas reflect real-world views, and that her students would be exposed to them outside academia. She does not agree with those ideas, she said, but presented the debate neutrally. Her students' own critical thinking would have to make sense of them.

For the three officials who confronted Shepherd, neutrality wasn't good enough. Her supervisor, Nathan Rambukkana, equated it to being neutral about Adolf Hitler. Another professor, Herbert Pimlott, made it clear that they were not to risk creating an environment where Peterson's views might be nurtured. The third official, Adria Joel, is Laurier University's acting manager of the "Gendered Violence Prevention and Support" program. According to Joel, Shepherd had not only violated the university's human rights code, but also, potentially, broken federal anti-discrimination laws.

Shepherd was accused of creating a toxic and potentially unsafe environment for transgendered students, facilitating hatred and even violence. "Do you see," Rambukkana said, "why this is not something...that is up for debate?" Shepherd would be required to file lesson plans in advance, and to submit to having a faculty overseer sit in on her tutorials. As for the informal consequences for her future career and reputation, one can only imagine.

Had Shepherd not made an [audio recording](#) of this meeting, as well as defended herself in a way that fully exposed the spirit of its inquisition, it is doubtful whether it would have come to light at all, much less gained international attention. The outcry the recording generated against censorship and indoctrination was immediate. Hundreds wrote to Shepherd expressing their support. Some were professors from Laurier itself, several of whom [defended her publicly](#). Later apologies by Rambukkana and university president Deborah MacLatchy were dubbed insincere, and even mocked in national media outlets.

Free-speech controversies are not unprecedented among Canadian universities, but the Laurier incident is unique for having induced a near-universal gag reflex. Even for the left, the offence on the part of officials was too raw for anyone to swallow.

For a time, it seemed there was genuine consensus—a watershed moment that might have brought change to the warped academic subculture whose agenda had been so starkly unmasked. The intrusion of social justice activism and its theories into the curricula and pedagogies of many Western universities had long been recognized, but often by those who threw the baby out with the bathwater, and called the whole institution corrupt. Such voices were easy to dismiss as philistine, just as those who defended the academy from within were vulnerable to charges of complicity. Shepherd's experience was sickening proof of "social justice" ideology not only intruding upon higher education but snaking towards truly Orwellian levels. If universities were to be defended, freedom had to be given priority over whatever ideas enjoyed sanctuary there.

Online conversations about this incident have tended to center upon Jordan Peterson himself, who has appeared alongside Lindsay Shepherd in American social media [to discuss the controversy](#).

In Canada, however, something is happening which is as discouraging as it is inevitable. Positions are slipping from a narrow summit of common principle back into the established trenches of the culture war. The left prioritizes concerns about the safety of transgendered people—maintaining that the Laurier incident has left them more exposed to hatred than ever—while the right plays gotcha with the left's hypocrisies—for example, its refusal to protect the same rights of [pro-life](#) and Jewish students on campuses. Even where the discussion drifts back toward academic freedom, as it did when Laurier's president [appeared on The Agenda](#) last week, the debate was over whether it is okay even to hear Peterson's

ideas, not whether it is okay to have them.

Though it is tempting to either pick a side or to be cynically neutral in this relapse, it is more important to recognize that in Canada, a combination of laws and social attitudes ensured it. When Opposition Conservative leader Andrew Scheer stood up in the House of Commons and invited the Liberal government to join him in “condemning the egregious crackdown on free speech at Laurier University,” the response by Science Minister Kirsty Duncan outlined the conditions that will ensure such crackdowns keep happening:

“Our government is committed to creating open spaces for Canadians to debate and express their views. In a free society we may disagree with a person’s views, but must defend their right to hold them, unless those views promote hate.

“Intolerance and hate have no place in Canadian society or in our post-secondary institutions. We’ll continue to fight to ensure the Charter of Rights of Canadians is upheld and that every Canadian can feel safe and secure in their community.”

It would be shortsighted to blame this equivocation on Canada’s criminal hate speech laws (Section 319) or on the various anti-discrimination measures the country has enacted (including Bill C-16, which enshrines gender identity and gender expression in the Canadian Human Rights Act). Most Western countries have comparable legislation, originally framed to redress such atrocities as the Holocaust and other historic civil rights abuses.

Just as important as any law on the books is the socio-cultural contract to see that law applied, and a large part of Canadian society seems willing not only to consider hatred a serious crime, but also to view certain topics as minefields of hatred.

The deep-seated consequences of this attitude can be seen in the Laurier incident and the many forums debating its fallout—so long one can criminalize opponents with accusations of hatred, one needs not debate their ideas.

From hatred, the accusations move quickly onto “violence”, to make sure that the disliked ideas are actually banned – becoming “[disallowable speech](#)” to quote the Wilfred Laurier University’s Rainbow Centre.

As the immovable object of free speech is ground away by the irresistible forces of the Canadian social conscience and legal system, the question we must ask is not who did the ideal thing at Wilfred Laurier University, but rather who was doing a better job preparing their students for success in the real world.

In a country where certain ideas will have you ostracized from polite society, viciously mocked, or even imprisoned, maybe it is best we ask ourselves not whether we should be free to say what we want, but whether it is best to create an allergy to those dangerous ideas as early as possible.

Harley J. Sims is a writer and independent scholar currently living on a mountainside near Vancouver, British Columbia. He can be reached on his website at <http://www.harleyjsims.webs.com>.

This [article](#) has been republished from MercatorNet under a Creative Commons license.