

From Debate to Denunciation: Frances Widdowson and the Closing of the Canadian Mind

By Patrick Keeney

A free society cannot endure without citizens capable of serious thought. The work of self-government demands habits of mind and character that are neither inherited automatically nor produced by bureaucratic proclamation. They are cultivated—slowly, patiently, and imperfectly—through engagement with difficult ideas, disciplined study, and the enlargement of the imagination. These are the fruits of a liberal education, which forms judgment, tempers passion, and creates citizens who can distinguish argument from dogma and truth from its counterfeits.

Yet we now find ourselves in a season when such cultivation has given way to something more brittle and troubling: a public life shaped not by thoughtful disagreement but by ideological fervour and a temperamental hostility to reason itself.

Consider the recent events at the University of Victoria. On

Dec. 2, Dr. Frances Widdowson—an established academic, formerly of Mount Royal University—was arrested for trespassing. Her offence? She attempted to give a talk on campus—at a public university, founded for the free exchange of ideas—addressing a controversial historical claim: Canada’s alleged genocide against Indigenous peoples.



To state the fact plainly: a university had a professor arrested for trying to speak.

One recoils not merely at the indignity of the spectacle but at what it reveals about the intellectual climate of our time. Widdowson had arranged to engage students in what universities once regarded as their *raison d'être*: open discussion of contested ideas. The administration, however, invoked the now-ritualistic bromides about “safety” and “community well-being.” Her event, they said, lacked official sanction. She was instructed not to appear. And when she did, she was handcuffed and removed from a campus that, not long ago, would have prided itself on defending the very freedoms it now subverts.

This is what we have become: a society that arrests professors for engaging in scholarly debate on university grounds.

It signals a new and troubling phase in public life, one where we no longer engage with our opponents’ arguments. The calm, reasoned exchange—the essence of democratic politics—has been replaced by moralistic condemnation, by a kind of performative

disdain that views disagreement as evidence of evil. Our public debates now resemble not town halls but inquisitions, where the verdict comes before the evidence, and dissent is seen not as an intellectual challenge but as a pathogen that must be eradicated.

This tendency points to something deeper than partisan zeal. It signals the loss of what George Steiner called the tragic vision of life—the recognition that human beings are imperfect creatures, that political structures can only be temporary, and that wisdom lies in recognising limits rather than striving for utopian perfection. The tragic sensibility accepts that reasonable people may disagree; that error is part of the human condition; and that humility is not a concession to our opponents but the foundation of a civilized society.

A culture that loses this sensibility becomes impatient with argument because argument assumes the possibility of being wrong. And nothing is more intolerable to the ideologue than uncertainty.

Humility, then, is precisely the virtue most lacking in our public discourse. In its place, we find a confrontational certainty—a self-righteousness so unbending that it has forgotten how to entertain doubt. Disagreement is no longer a natural part of civic life but an existential threat. Those who dissent are no longer mistaken; they are malicious. Their views are not errors to be corrected but moral evils to be eradicated. Increasingly, their very presence is seen as intolerable, prompting calls to silence, sanction, or expel them from the university—the same institution once regarded as a sanctuary for intellectual freedom. A place that once nurtured debate now recoils from the very idea of it.

What dominates our public sphere today is not the language of democratic citizenship but something older and more ominous: the language of purification and moral absolutism. Ideology

claims a monopoly on truth, and appeals to righteousness become the justification for censorship. Under such conditions, the architecture of genuine conversation collapses. What remains is the familiar liturgy of our age: cheap insult, tedious moralizing, and the secondhand embarrassment of watching adults conduct themselves with the decorum of children denied a treat.

The consequences go far beyond just public embarrassment. When citizens cannot tell the difference between rational critique and villainous caricature, they lose a key virtue of self-governance: the respect for those who see the world differently.

And when a university—an institution whose legitimacy depends on its dedication to free inquiry—calls police to arrest a professor for starting an academic discussion, we move from political problems to something more dangerous: the suppression of free thought, which is essential for all knowledge. We risk damaging this core principle. As Orwell said, “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

Recovering democratic discourse requires, first, a recovery of intellectual humility—the recognition that our own certainties may be partial, parochial, or simply mistaken. Humility does not require self-abasement; it only calls for an honest acknowledgment of our fallibility. It also involves a renewed dedication to intellectual growth: reading broadly, thinking carefully, and resisting the lure of moralistic oversimplification. Liberal education, when properly understood, is not a finishing school for ideological trends but a training ground for sound judgment. It fosters patience, discrimination, and the discipline of engaging with arguments more compelling than our own.

Ultimately, restoring democratic dialogue requires embracing a tragic perspective: a clear-eyed understanding that politics

is about what is possible, not perfect; that our highest ideals are always tempered by human nature; and that the best we can reasonably aim for is a decent—albeit imperfect—order of our shared life, founded on compromise rather than crusade.

These are not fashionable claims. They promise no utopia, no inevitable arc of justice, no intoxicating assurances of moral triumph. What they offer instead is the modest possibility of a society capable of living with its own complexity. A society that understands freedom not as moral exhibitionism but as the fragile achievement of human reason. One that values thought over slogan, deliberation over denunciation, and inquiry over the intoxicating pleasures of ideological purity.

The real choice before us is not the familiar one between left and right, liberal and conservative. The deeper choice is between a politics that respects human complexity and one that reduces citizenship to the enthusiasms of the tribe. The former is the hard path of a free people; the latter, the soft decadence of those who have forgotten how freedom is sustained.

A free society demands better. Whether we can summon the intellectual and moral resources to deliver better remains the central question of our age.

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