

# Jordan Peterson exposes "the great liberal death wish"

by Conrad Black

I have just endured the sobering experience of watching the always very intelligent and professional Steve Paikin chair a panel about the trans-gender controversy that centres on University of Toronto professor Dr. Jordan Peterson. I had vaguely followed the story as it percolated up in the press, much of the frothings in which must usually be taken lightly. It was, I fear, a piercing glimpse into what great and venerable statesmen of my youth such as Winston Churchill, Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, and Louis St. Laurent called "days that I shall not see." I did not, until now, grasp the fine balance between gratitude and wistfulness in their invocation of that phrase; as a young person, I thought it the license of the great to engage in histrionics, and I now claim it as the right of lesser yet aging people, such as myself.

For those who have sagely ducked or otherwise been spared exposure to this controversy, Dr. Peterson rejects the right of his students to require him to address them, if they are trans-people (i.e. in some state of flux between the male and female poles of gender identification – not their orientation, whether they are homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or asexual has nothing to do with it), otherwise than in a way that consigns them to the claustrophobic confines of being male or female. "Ze" for he or she and "Zir" in place of his or her are the sticking points, but what is accumulating behind these imbecilic distinctions is quite sinister. The tape Steve Paikin ran of Dr. Peterson being reviled and shouted down and physically intimidated at the University of Toronto was distressing and we may be on the edge of a defining moment in our jolly and progressive Canadian civilization. Dr. Peterson sees it as a matter of freedom of expression and believes that

others do not have the authority to require him to address them in a newly-hatched vocabulary devised to oppress the "gender-binary" conventional practice, while his opponents profess to believe that in refusing to do so, he is committing a hate crime punishable by human rights commissions or tribunals.

Those hoary-headed monsters, whose egregious trespasses on freedom of expression in the name of despotic political correctness has been heroically and successfully contested by my friends Mark Steyn and Ezra Levant and others, does not prescribe imprisonment under the articles invoked by Dr. Peterson's assailants, but a fine is possible. As if to assure the least possibility of a quiet end to this preposterous issue, Dr. Peterson has declared that he will not pay a fine, and if imprisoned for not paying it, would embark on a hunger strike. While my sympathies are with Dr. Peterson, this is an unjustified hypothetical escalation. If it came to that, the authorities would attach his bank account or his income and collect the fine in that manner rather than imprisoning him and provoking a hunger strike.

Dr. Peterson's approach is so inflexible and so entirely righteous, without much using the powerful weapon of ridicule that is available to him, he may not attract the full range of support the virtue of his arguments and his personal courage deserve. But on the substance of the issue, he is, of course, correct. We must always be wary of the majoritarian tyranny, which has preoccupied many civil libertarians, including the principal authors of the Constitution of the United States, especially James Madison and Alexander Hamilton (who agreed on little else). But the transgender community is less than one per cent of the population. As I have written many times in many contexts over many years, rights do not exist only for the numerous, and a litmus test of the legitimacy of a society is its observance of the rights of minorities, including especially minorities of one. The jurisprudence of all great

democratic nations is replete with famous cases to this effect: Capt. Dreyfus, Dr. Samuel Mudd (who was prosecuted for treating the assassin of Abraham Lincoln though there was no evidence that he was involved in the plot), even the British Archer-Shee affair made famous in the drama, the Winslow Boy.

The Peterson affair is threatening to cross the double white line. All people must be treated with respect, equally. But there are only two genders, two sexes; our species and all other mammals are "gender-binary." All people may state their sex, and if that is contrary to physical appearances, that remains their right. But no individual or group has the right to invent a new vocabulary and a new co-equal gender because of a state of ambivalence or confusion about which sex they are. Every legally competent individual has a perfect and absolute right to declare their sex, but not to create a new legal status and legally require the use of a new vocabulary for those in flux between the only two sexes we have, mercilessly binary though their finite number may be. The individuals in that condition may change their registered sex each day if they wish, but not treat anyone who declines to address them in terms that debunk the gender-binary world as guilty of a hate-crime, punishable by imposable fines.

About six months ago I wrote a column in this space about the acceptance by the Supreme Court of Canada to hear an appeal of judgments from well-reasoned local courts, a request from a British Columbia band of native people numbering 900, who claimed that 25 years of consultation was constitutionally inadequate over a proposed ski area that an elder of their band was supernaturally advised (and after a lapse of some years told his people) would drive off the spirit of the grizzly bear that was central to the religion of that band. I concluded the column with the shabby polemical device that I only employ rarely, a rhetorical question, in this case "Are we all mad?"

Of course we are not, and we still live in a country where

people can self-identify as they wish, even if it diverges from apparent realities. But we are almost at the point where people who decline to be legally forced to acknowledge the more implausible applications of this right are subject to persecution by social justice warriors and, quite conceivably, the government.

We are terrifyingly reluctant to impose normal rules of free discourse over the agitations of people who are using an imagined unlimited latitude on sexual self-description to gag, dictate to, and prosecute reasonable people exercising their rights to free expression. It is another manifestation (of which the hypocritically respectful lamentations about the Stalinist despot Fidel Castro are another), of what my late friend Malcolm Muggeridge called "the great liberal death wish." The great majority do not want to go along for that ride, and this time, the great majority must be heard and obeyed.

First published in the