

U of T prof should be allowed to be wrong: Editorial

University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson is wrong about gender, but that shouldn't cost him his job.

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Cassandra Williams, U of T student union member, in front of sign at protest against statements by Prof. Jordan Peterson. (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

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Jordan Peterson is wrong about many things — about what we know about gender, about the obligations of the majority in a pluralistic society and about basic human decency, for instance. But the University of Toronto psychology professor, [currently in hot water over his outdated views](#), should not be run out of academia, as some of his critics would like. He's on the wrong side of just the sort of debate universities ought not to smother.

Peterson's trouble began when he posted a YouTube video last month in which he rejected the current progressive thinking on gender fluidity. "I don't know what the options are if you're not a man or a woman," he said, ignoring a robust body of evidence that gender exists on a spectrum.

In denouncing Bill C-16, the transgender rights legislation now before Parliament, he took particular issue with those who identify as gender non-conforming, as neither a man nor a woman, and prefer to be called "they." "I'm not going to use pronouns that aren't part of the standard English language corpus," he later said, as if language were an immutable thing rather than a reflection of evolving culture.

Some of Peterson's concerns — about the way oversensitivity can suppress speech and about the vagaries of hate-speech laws — are legitimate.

But a close reading of the professor's recent comments suggests he may be less worried about free speech than he is simply irritated by difference. In his video, he muses about whether Premier Kathleen Wynne's sexual orientation may have something to do with the province's recent recognition of Ontarians' "right to define their own gender identity."

He told *The Varsity*, a U of T student newspaper, that when someone who "deviates in some way" asks "the collective to welcome (them) with open arms . . . that's probably asking too much." Rather, "what you should ask the collective is (that) they tolerate your deviance without too much aggression." That's a pretty cruel view, which at worst perpetuates exclusion and discrimination.

Perhaps Peterson's preoccupation with the alleged tyranny of political correctness stems, as is so often the case, from resentment that his views are becoming increasingly unacceptable. It costs very little to refer to someone by the gender pronoun of their choosing, to give them just that basic respect. Whatever one's philosophy of gender, human decency surely requires it.

Bill C-16 was introduced by the Trudeau government to protect the rights of trans and gender non-conforming people, groups that remain among the most vulnerable. It promises to provide overdue legal protections, but also to speed up a social evolution that is already underway.

No doubt there will continue to be tricky tensions between that process and free speech, but Peterson's case largely avoids them. He's wrong, but so too are many of the protesters who gathered on campus this week. We should be gratified that they reject his views, but worried that so many have also called for his firing.

Take it from A.W. Peet, a tenured professor of physics at U of T who identifies as non-binary. Despite describing Peterson's opinions as a noxious "tire fire," Peet argued he should be allowed to keep his professorship. "Academic freedom is something that protects people who we believe to be odious conservatives as much as it protects people we believe to be awesome progressives," said Peet. They are exactly right.