

Barbara Kay: This spring, the fight to protect free speech in Canada continues

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Never has freedom of speech been so vulnerable in Canada, but I will be privileged to take personal inspiration and hope for change on this front at three events on my spring calendar. On April 26 in Montreal, as chair of the committee that is mounting the event, I will be introducing Jordan Peterson, keynote speaker for the Montreal Press Club's inaugural freedom award ceremony, honouring courage in journalism. Our recipient is Raif Badawi, the famous blogger tortured and imprisoned for voicing opinions frowned upon by the Saudi regime. Raif's wife and tireless advocate, Ensaf Haidar, a permanent Canadian resident who lives in nearby Sherbrooke with their children, will accept the award on his behalf. Since the Saudis are eager to curry favour in the West for support in their ongoing standoff with Iran, now would be an excellent time for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to re-petition for Badawi's release. Efforts have been rebuffed in the past, but as events and alliances shift, it cannot hurt to try again. How wonderful would it be if Raif could accept the award in person? (--image--)

Ensaf Haidar, wife of detained blogger Raif Badawi, holds a poster with his photo at a rally on Jan. 13, 2015, in Montreal. Badawi, who is still imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, is being awarded the Montreal Press Club's inaugural freedom award honouring courage in journalism.

Ryan Remiorz/CP

On June 15, the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, on whose board I sit, will present its inaugural George Jonas Freedom award at a dinner I am pleased to help plan. Jonas, a long-time Post columnist and author who passed away in 2016, was Canadian journalism's pre-eminent defender of freedom of speech, and I am delighted to see his memory honoured in this appropriate way. The JCCF award recipient is gadfly journalist Mark Steyn, of whom I am an unabashed groupie. Who better to receive the award? For decades, defiant contrarian Steyn has boldly lent his glittering intelligence, wit and brio to the defence of freedom to challenge received wisdom on the most politically freighted subjects of our era — and paid a hefty financial and professional price for sticking to his guns. I think Jonas would have enthusiastically endorsed our choice. Finally, this Thursday I will moderate a debate at Wilfrid Laurier University, "Abortion: whose body? Whose choice?," emceed by Lindsay Shepherd. Shepherd is the WLU grad student, whose surreptitiously recorded, then published, dressing-down by her speech-suppressive academic superiors provoked a national conversation on the perils of social-justice absolutism. This in turn sparked serious self-interrogation at WLU's administrative level regarding slippage in the university's commitment to academic freedom. (Which is why, although the debate topic is considered provocative, WLU has a vested interest in taking particular care to prevent disruption of the event by the usual suspects.) (--image--)

Columnist Mark Steyn, seen on March 3, 2014, in Toronto, will receive the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms' inaugural George Jonas award on June 15, 2018.

Tyler Anderson/National Post

When the debate went public, a certain @AlliRothberg tweeted, "So it's starting to look like @BarbaraRKay isn't a neutral moderator here, and actually sits on the board of @JCCFCanada, how is the right so scummy? Waiting on her response." I was puzzled on both counts. The JCCF provides pro bono legal help to people whose constitutional speech rights have been suppressed or thwarted by the government. What's her beef with that, I wondered? All was illuminated when I discovered my critic had previously posted the Soviet flag on her Twitter feed (not in irony; she self-describes as a "communist"). But it saddened me to realize that someone can graduate from a Canadian university, still ignorant of the

manifold evils, speech suppression amongst them, that flag represents. Rothberg also tweeted me: “Will you consider dropping out of moderating the debate? Not b/c doing so is right or wrong, just b/c it would lower tensions, and be a pragmatic step to make sure the debate actually occurs?”

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Here is an instructive glimpse into the mind of the alt-left. I don't have to be neutral in my opinions to act fairly as a moderator. I am in fact neither pro-choice nor pro-life in the political sense of the terms. But I do vigorously defend the right of pro-lifers to make their case without obstruction, from which only ideologues would deduce I would show favouritism to the pro-life side. In the left's intolerant world, one doesn't defend the right to speak for people whose views one dislikes. Leftists therefore consider it reasonable to ask those they disagree with to de-platform themselves in order to avoid tension. But I am not causing the tension. Instead of asking me to respect the heckler's vote pre-emptively, why aren't those who deplore me — the real deplorables — asked to simmer down in the interest of free intellectual exchange?

The irony here is that although I hold strong opinions on abortion, multiple surveys show that they coincide with the views of most Canadians. I look forward to expanding on my position in my introductory remarks to those who attend the debate. And, not to be negative, but I hope WLU will post a security guard at every fire alarm in the event's vicinity.

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