

Peter Menzies: Those Who Seek to Suppress Free Speech Pose a Greater Risk Than Those Who Abuse It

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Many have used free speech to inspire beauty, faith, and courage, few more famously than Sir Winston Churchill who, it was said, “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle,” writes Peter Menzies. Public Domain



By Peter Menzies

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Commentary

Now that the procedural logjam that had parliamentary business on hold for several weeks has been broken, Canadians can soon expect legislation cracking down on online speech to be front and centre.

That means that people who take offence from statements made by others on social media will be empowered with a fresh new set of

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tools to silence people who say things they believe are troublesome.



Each company like Meta, TikTok, YouTube, Truth Social, X, and

Facebook will also face large fines from a new Digital Safety

Commission if they allow problematic speech to be posted. That



means that—notwithstanding Meta’s confession that it may have been

overly aggressive in its takedowns—it will have to be more vigilant



than ever in removing posts and suspending or banning users, as it

did with incoming U.S. President Donald Trump a little less than four

years ago.



To the extent that this protects youth from harm, the intentions are at

least good.

A great many Canadians will like that part, but as I recently discovered, there is also no shortage of people prepared to support the state in its desire to sanction people for speech of which it and others disapprove.

I wrote recently about the case of England’s Allison Pearson, a columnist for the Daily Telegraph. Police there had been alerted to a year-old tweet she had posted and, on Nov. 10, knocked on her door asking her to, as they put it in the UK, assist them with their inquiries.

The post in question involved Pearson mistaking a photo of men with a Pakistani flag for Palestinian supporters, whom she called “Jew-haters,” and, as they were joined by police, criticizing the latter for

displaying bias in their favour. When she realized her error, she deleted the post.

That, though, didn't stop the local bobbies from pursuing the matter. Police, who in the UK are armed with five sets of laws that oversee speech, [later dropped the matter](#) after investigating it as a possible crime for inciting hatred, an extremely subjective term. To illustrate the severity with which courts in England punish speech, I pointed to the case of a middle aged woman with no priors, [Julie Sweeney](#), who was jailed for 18 months for a Facebook post in which she, in an apparent rage following the Southport murders of little girls, called for the local mosque to be blown up with its adherents in it.

It was a truly dreadful, inexcusable thing to post, the court heard, but had no mercy for the fact that the woman in question regretted her appalling statement very quickly and had deleted it.

What then caught my eye was the reaction from a segment of readers who, through the comments and via X, felt strongly that my questioning of the severity of Ms. Sweeney's punishment—no one had acted on her shocking "advice"—was itself offensive and displayed a darkly suspicious tolerance for the extremism her post had displayed. To them, imprisonment was the appropriate response, and concern regarding it was over the top.

Where, I wondered, would those folks have come down in the case of a former [leader](#) of a civil liberties association in B.C., who had used Twitter, as it was then called, to urge the burning of churches when she was angered by reports of graves at residential schools. She certainly did not evade sanction, suffering a wave of criticism involving "inexcusable racism and misogyny and threats to physical and mental safety" before resigning from her job as head of the organization.

While people did indeed take up that [suggestion](#) and churches were burned and continue to be burned, Canadian police were not knocking on her door and she continues her activism. Good for her. She suffered employment and other civil society consequences for her ill-considered language, but remains at large.

Free speech is messy. At times it is ugly and barely tolerable. People who abuse it deserve to be subjected to harsh criticism and career consequences. Every right, after all, carries responsibilities and consequences with it. But had her comments been made in England, she likely would have been jailed.

There is clearly a segment of Canadian society that would be OK with turning these single moments of irresponsible, anger-fuelled outbursts into matters for the police. If there wasn't, the federal government wouldn't have introduced the Online Harms Act, which although it is now being split into separate pieces of legislation, was designed to order takedowns, empower the police to suppress speech before it is spoken, and grant new authorities to the federal human rights commission to fine people up to \$20,000.

Speech can do harm and is at times execrable. It's a powerful tool that throughout history has proven itself capable of turning people against each other.

It has also been applied for good, toppling any number of dictatorships. Many have used it to inspire beauty, faith, and courage, few more famously than Sir Winston Churchill who, it was said, "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle."

For all its faults, I can't shake the fear that those who wish to suppress our freedom of expression are a greater threat to democracy than are those who abuse it.

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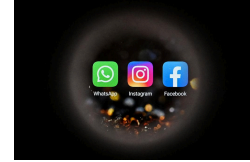
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