

Our Ailing Academia

Massey College's rejection of Margaret Wente serves as yet another example of the potentially terminal malaise afflicting Western universities

by Conrad Black



Margaret Wente

Diligent readers will recall that I've had some differences with Margaret Wente, long a senior columnist of the Globe and Mail, but it is an honour and a duty to defend her against the cowardly and hypocritical treatment she has received from Massey College. Having been nominated for and elected to one of Canadian academia's less-exclusive groups, Massey College's Quadrangle Society (apparently a phrenological rather than architectural description), Margaret Wente was abruptly rejected because of the insufficiency of her apparent fervour in proclaiming the ubiquity of racism in Canada and pursuing racists with the determination of U.S. Marines driving the

Japanese defenders of Iwo Jima and Okinawa with flame-throwers into caves and incinerating them. It was also objected, with a high affectation of professional exaltedness, that she was an undischarged plagiarist. (I don't know anything about that, but I doubt it.)

Massey College, founded in the 1960s, was the ultimate expression of English imitativeness in post-colonial Canadian development. It was the brainchild of former governor general, minister to Washington, high commissioner to the United Kingdom, Liberal party chairman and unsuccessful parliamentary candidate Vincent Massey, brother of the distinguished film actor Raymond Massey. The Massey family prospered in the farm equipment business and Massey Harris, subsequently Massey Ferguson, was one of the great manufacturers of tractors and combine harvesters in the world. Vincent Massey was undoubtedly a cultured man full of good intentions for Canada, though of distinctly fallible judgment – he was enthused at the Munich agreement and, as head of the Massey Commission in the Fifties, advocated an absolute radio and television monopoly for the CBC. I met him a couple of times; he was rather pompous and some of that has been transposed to some of the institutions he influenced, including Massey College. It is an elegant Oxbridge replication in the vast domain of the University of Toronto and had as its first master the eminent writer and delightful man, Robertson Davies.

Some recent principals (as they are now called) have been my friends of a great many years. John Fraser and former senator Hugh Segal maintained the standards of the college. But a clear signal that the barbarians of political correctness had pierced the ivy-covered ramparts was sent when Hugh dismissed historian Michael Marrus after one ill-considered racially insensitive joke. Marrus is a reputable historian and though he is not Canada's most emollient personality, that treatment of him was unjust, and as Hugh Segal is a fair-minded and civilized man, it was clear evidence of the approaching

danger. I congratulate Margaret MacMillan, another distinguished academic and historian I have known cordially for a very long time, for both supporting Marrus and resigning from the Quadrangle Society in support of Wente. Vertebrate academics are now our most endangered species. I do not know the new head of Massey College, Nathalie Des Rosiers, but to judge from the chatty messages she sends out to the Massey community, she seems to be a perfect allegorization for the surging tide of militant wokeness that has immersed our entire academic community and transformed much of it into a quagmire of militant societal self-hate.

This is the potentially terminal malaise of Western academia and it has reduced most of the Western media to life-support as well. In an ancient tragedian storyline, Western civilization defeated the perverted assaults of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia, and then flattered itself with notions of what American public intellectual Francis Fukuyama famously described as "the end of history." This theory held that political evolution had reached its perfect phase with world-triumphant democracy and the free market. Then, without serious threats from outside, societal suicide became the threat. The endless and constant preoccupation with racism and especially the maniacal requirement to profess to detect racism everywhere, behind every bush and under every bed and lurking within every heart and mind, is now almost a psychosis. The international left, defeated in the Cold War, rallied to the environmental movement and attacked capitalism from a new angle – in the name of saving the planet, on scanty and contested evidence of the mortal danger of carbon use. The racism argument has developed parallel to the Green Terror.

The number of people in Canada and other generally advanced democracies who would actually qualify as racists, people who automatically despise or disdain other people because of their race, is very small. Every public and private organization in

Canada and other civilized countries has in its governing documents purposeful statements of opposition to racial and other forms of discrimination. Yet this country has allowed public opinion to be inordinately influenced by people who relish destroying the careers of others by screaming racist epithets at them, even when there is absolutely not a scintilla of justification for it. This is the case with both Margaret Wente and Michael Marrus. Faced with the protests against Ms. Wente, Ms. Des Rosiers, former president of the Law Commission of Canada and counsel to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association as she is, folded like a three-dollar suitcase. This illustrates accurately, I'm afraid, the current rigour and integrity and dedication to free and wide-ranging debate of our universities.

The Quadrangle Society is not of the slightest significance, as former candidate member Wente has remarked with suitable acidulousness. But the internal enemies of our civilization here and in other countries are forcing a showdown between the traditional concept of freedom that has generally ruled in the English- and French-speaking world for centuries and has been gradually amplified and heroically defended, and this new mindless nihilistic fanaticism that is at its gentlest and most innocuous in trivial acts of oppression such as occurred at Massey College. It is essentially the same mentality, stirred to vehemence and armed with all the power of the U.S. Constitution's reverence for firearms that transformed a repulsive act of police interracial murder in Minneapolis into huge financial losses to vandalism and arson, a score of violent deaths, and assaults upon the statues of such universally esteemed figures as Lincoln, Grant, Frederick Douglass and Winston Churchill. The forces of liberty are under siege from within.

As for our universities, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed them in their ghastly infirmity as hideously expensive, infested with underworked seditious hypocrites and cowards,

overfunded, and largely dedicated to the graduation of marginal disciplines of people barely able to earn a living but brainwashed of the unworthiness of our society. Most courses calling themselves "studies" should be conducted online and academically replaced by preparation for skilled and economically necessary work. Funding should be curtailed to any institution that does not guarantee free discussion and expression. Licensed broadcasters and television stations and distribution networks that do not observe the same standards should be subject to licence review by qualified non-political judges. Our civilization has nurtured a viper that must be defanged. Lincoln and Churchill and John A. Macdonald were more virtuous than Cleopatra, and we should not suffer her fate.

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