

Lt.-Gen. (retd) Maisonneuve: Clearing the air about my anti-woke speech

I have faith that we can fix what ails Canada with leadership, service, unity and courage

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Remarks he made in a recent speech while accepting the Vimy Award have been misrepresented and distorted, to the point that he has found himself being "cancelled," writes Lt.-Gen. (retd) Michel Maisonneuve, as he clarifies his statements. PHOTO BY MARIO POIRIER / COURTESY OF LT.-GEN. (RETD) MICHEL MAISONNEUVE

After spending five decades defending Canada's security, democratic values, and its citizens' right to free speech, I am astonished at how my remarks upon accepting the Vimy Award three weeks ago have been misrepresented and distorted. Some organizations I worked with have decided to cut ties with me as a result; so as my attempted cancellation continues, I take this opportunity to comment on the aftermath of an anti-woke speech.

Let me begin by taking full responsibility for my remarks. If you read any of the multitude of excerpts, tweets or blogs about my speech you will have gathered that I am unhappy with much of the current state of our country; I am. However, if you listened to my speech or read it in its entirety, you would also know that I believe in this country, its military and its citizens. And I have faith that we can fix what ails Canada with leadership, service, unity and courage.

Some of the most egregious fabrications need to be addressed.

There are those who concluded from my remarks that I refuse to acknowledge issues of sexual misconduct in the military. Putting aside the outright stretch of imagination this

deduction requires, I believe predators exist in every organization — our military included. I believe these predators must be found, charged and punished to the fullest extent of the law. Any person who breaks what I would call the moral code of behaviour and respect between military professionals regardless of rank does not belong in uniform. We must continue to support the victims and guarantee a safe environment for all who serve. But my faith in our justice system extends to the due process of law to which all citizens are entitled. Proof must accompany an accusation because the presumption of innocence is still a fundamental principle of Canadian criminal law. There needs to be a plan in place for those who are found not guilty in order to resume their lives. Cancel culture deems an accusation is as good as a guilty verdict. This is a blight on our society, as well as a direct contravention of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Cancel culture deems an accusation is as good as a guilty verdict

I stated that taking personal responsibility for our own actions has disappeared from the landscape while the phenomenon of collective apologies flourishes. From this statement I have been accused of standing under the spectacular totem poles of the Canadian Museum of History and denying the mistreatment of our First Nations; another stretch of imaginative association. I have the utmost respect for our First Nations and their culture; I believe we must continue to acknowledge their presence and their contributions to Canada. The apologies they received from successive governments, various churches and Pope Francis were deserved. There is not one Canadian today, I am sure, who would want to resurrect residential schools or who believes we should try to assimilate Indigenous peoples. But simply continuing to apologize moves us into the realm of virtue signalling. Isn't it time to replace apologies with promises kept? For decades we have promised these Canadians clean drinking water and have yet to deliver. There is a moral contract between our Indigenous peoples and Canadian society that is broken and needs to be fixed. Promises kept, not apologies, can begin to repair that contract.

I said that mainstream media does not always provide a balanced view of all sides of an issue. Having seen the distortion of my words these past weeks I rest my case. I will note, however, that while there is a dearth of unbiased journalism, there remains a segment dedicated to the truth, and for that I am grateful.

I accused today's leaders of dividing rather than uniting. Online searches of the terms "fringe radicals" and "deplorables" resulted in gleeful identification of the leaders who used these terms, which further cemented my dismissal as a right-wing extremist. I stand by my challenge to the leaders of today — take a page from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's playbook: strive to unite us; not divide us.

Take a page from Zelenskyy's playbook

My statements regarding uniforms no longer being uniform have been construed as a direct criticism of Gen. Wayne Eyre and his leadership of the Canadian Armed Forces. This is simply not true. I have the greatest respect for the CDS; he is navigating a difficult road. He is leading a change of culture within the CAF while recruiting to bring the Forces to full complement. In addition, he is responding to ongoing and new operational commitments and newly developed strategies. The government does not seem to understand the requirements of military service and its unlimited liability clause. Without new resources and funding, walking while chewing gum will get you nowhere. I applaud the reforms brought about to instil respect between members of the CAF in all their diversity. Anyone of any community who wants to serve our country should be entitled to do so, to be respectfully treated, and treat others respectfully, whatever their race, religion, sexual orientation or political beliefs.

I do, however, stand by my assertion that uniforms ought to be uniform. I believe the pendulum has swung too far. Uniforms have for centuries represented belonging, values, traditions and expected codes of conduct. Uniforms proclaim membership in an entity that is greater than the sum of its parts. Wearing a uniform declares one is part of a team that has a specific and common mission; in the military, that mission is to fight and win our wars and to project Canadian values. Successful and safe completion of that mission does not leave room for personal expression. Expressing your individuality or personal choices should be done when not in uniform.

The last, and for me, most damaging translation of my remarks concerns its impact on my work with our veterans. I have long been an advocate for our veterans and that will never change; there is no debt owed by a country greater than that owed to those who fought under its flag. Our veterans need help, not just with policies but also with Veterans Affairs Canada employees who have an understanding of the profession of arms and who demonstrate care and compassion for former service members.

In closing, I repeat what I believe: We live in the greatest country in the world with almost unlimited resources, and a tolerant, diverse and educated population who can aspire to the greatest heights. We should be prepared to serve our country and be proud to do so. And our leaders must strive to unite us in sharing that vision.

These are my words and I stand by them.

Special to National Post

Lt.-Gen. (retd) Michel Maisonneuve spent 35 years in the CAF and 10 more as Academic Director of RMC Saint-Jean. He testified in The Hague against Slobodan Milosevic, commanded the funeral for the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa, is a huge advocate for Veterans, a life-time supporter of bilingualism and served as the first Chief of Staff of NATO's Supreme Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Va.