

# Political Identity Centrality: A Case Study in Cancellation

by Collin May

## Introduction

While the academic literature on cancellation is growing, most research looks at specific instances of cancellation. Relatively few consider cancellation from a more conceptual perspective. Thankfully, this is changing. A number of researchers working in management organization published a study in *Acta Psychologica* in February 2024, entitled: “The Association Between Political Identity Centrality and Cancelling Proclivity.” The Study focuses on political identity as a strong indicator for participation in cancelling, looking at both initiating through “calling out” and propagating cancelling efforts through “piling on.”

My intention in this essay is to apply the findings in the *Acta Psychologica* study to my own cancellation event to determine if the study’s results correlate with my specific cancellation scenario, highlighting the motivations of politically affiliated cancellers who targeted me.

## A Cancellation

My cancellation centered around my appointment as the first openly gay Chief of the Alberta Human Rights Commission (AHRC) on May 25, 2022. Prior to my appointment, I had served for three years as a part-time Commissioner with the AHRC, had written over forty published decisions and conducted more than forty mediation sessions. My educational background consists of advanced degrees in political philosophy and religion (including the intellectual history of rights) from Harvard University and the Ecole des hautes etudes en sciences sociales in Paris. I also hold a law degree from Dalhousie Law School and worked with the United Nations International Telecommunications Union and the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent in Geneva, Switzerland from 1997 to 2002.

My cancellation consisted of three distinct phases. Initially, I was criticized by an academic on the day my appointment was announced, alleging that I

was unqualified for the position. The next barrage, in early July 2022, came from a politically affiliated blogger who attacked me for an academic book review I had written in 2009 on Professor Efraim Karsh's book, *Islamic Imperialism: A History*, published by Yale University Press. This attack involved the most widespread efforts at cancellation using one out-of-context line from the review to allege that I was racist and Islamophobic.

The third phase, coming in mid-September 2022, consisted of an open letter written by the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) calling for my removal. I was subsequently fired as Chief of the AHRC by the Alberta Government led by Premier Jason Kenney of the United Conservative Party (UCP).

## The *Acta Psychologica* Study

In light of the substantive topics covered in the *Acta Psychologica* study (the study), I will provide a fairly detailed summary of its findings as they afford appreciable insight into my cancellation experience as well as the motivations of the actors involved.

### 1. Cancellation

The study's goal was to determine if there is a higher proclivity to engage in cancelling behavior among those who display what the authors call "political identity centrality." The Study's authors define cancelling as:

[A]n attempt by individuals to leverage power and punish brands who transgress against perceived moral and

social norms (such as making racist remarks, behaving unpatriotically, or supporting a controversial figure).

As with many definitions of cancellation, the authors outline a common cancelling pattern, summarizing it in six distinct stages: an alleged transgression occurs; a public call out identifies the transgressor; moral catastrophizing amplifies the transgression; additional individuals pile on; the target's character is identified solely with the transgression; a final resolution in the form of terminating employment or deplating results.

The Study goes on to note that cancellers may engage in all or a combination of the above stages, but every cancellation tends towards certain benefits the cancellers hope to secure, including: "reducing dissonance caused by the transgression, experiencing a sense of power over the target, acting in alignment with a core identity, confirming in-group identity, demonstrating competencies or expertise on a topic, and presenting oneself as a moral person."

### 2. Political Identity Centrality

The authors go on to focus on their newly created concept of "political identity centrality," defining it as: "the extent to which one's political identity (e.g., as a 'liberal' or a 'conservative') is central to self-concept." As the Study notes, political identity centrality is not partisan in that it does not make distinctions based on political ideology. Additionally, it is also independent of whether such political beliefs are mainline or extreme, fo-

cusing instead on how much one's identity is dependent on their beliefs rather than the location of such beliefs on the political spectrum.

The authors also refer to external research that has found that the more central a political identity is to an individual's self-conception, the more likely that individual is to: 1.) act on the beliefs associated with that identity; 2.) engage in behaviors to reinforce that identity; and 3.) draw less on other identities like gender, race, or occupation. I will be focusing on the third element in this list later in the discussion of my own cancellation.

### 3. Mediators

The Study also applied mediating factors to cancellation based on the authors' observations that cancellations are highly connected to the propagation of a "strict definition of morality that is unwavering and without compromise." The Study identifies four mediators that act as motivations. These include:

- a. Moral Exporting—active supporting and propagation of one's own morality in order to eliminate the canceller's own internal dissonance caused by the perceived target's transgression;
- b. Social Vigilantism—using counterarguments when faced with transgressions, cancellers can disseminate their own "superior attitudes and beliefs" with the goal of educating the "ignorant other";

- c. Virtue Signalling—cancellers with a high political identity centrality seek to demonstrate their adherence to an in-group by publicly stating their moral abhorrence of a target's actions or words deemed to transgress the in-group's ideology; and
- d. Self-efficacy—those with high political identity centrality may hold "relatively limited and simple cognitive resources and be unaware of their limitedness," and will use cancellation as a means to augment their sense of self-empowerment and ability to manage situations and concepts they do not fully understand.

### 4. Findings

The Study's findings, based on a sample of 459 individuals, suggest two key cancellation actors with specific motivations as chosen from among the four proposed above.

First, the authors identify that those with high political identity centrality are prone to engage in an initiating action of calling out motivated by virtue signaling:

Our findings suggest that political identity centrality leads individuals to react more strongly to transgressions (demand harsher punishments, posting negative comments on social media, etc.), and this occurs through virtue signaling. Thus, the response to transgressions more broadly seems to be more about self-enhancing or signalling to in-group members rather than actually changing the situation in some way.

The data indicates a strong proclivity by cancellers to virtue signal to their own in-group with the intention of self-enhancing rather than improving a particular social or political harm or failing. While the Study does not go into normative conclusions, this would suggest that the contention that cancellation is simply a form of counter-speech designed to hold transgressors accountable for their actions is untenable. As a result of these conclusions, I do not use the term “transgressor” to identify the subject of cancellation. Rather, because the canceller’s motivation is primarily self-interested rather than altruistic, I prefer the term “target” as it more properly connotes a victim of a cancellation attack.

Second, the Study also identifies a subsequent reaction whereby other members of an in-group pile on in a collective action of social vigilantism: “Conversely, the relationship between political identity centrality and calling out and piling on occurs through social vigilantism, wherein individuals feel a duty to correct the beliefs and behaviors of potentially ‘ignorant’ others.”

The piling on aspect that propagates the original calling out involves a communal social vigilantism. Interestingly, the authors refer to this as an obligation or duty on the part of cancellers seeking to correct the target’s “transgression” on the assumption that the target represents the “ignorant other.” Thus, there is both a sense of intellectual superiority and a tribal effort to isolate the target as outsider.

## A Case Study

My case study will focus on two individuals, both professors, who represent precise aspects of my experience with cancellation. While there are others who could be included in what was a relatively small pool of cancellers, the following will be sufficient to assess the applicability of the Study.

### 1. Attack #1: No Good Appointment Goes Unpunished

The first cancellation attack against me originated from a former law professor who posted a series of tweets denigrating my qualifications for the post of AHRC Chief and stating that I had received an unmerited patronage appointment.

As with most cancellers, the retired professor relied on social media to proliferate his comments, which included a series of five individual tweets posted on May 25, 2022, the day the Alberta Government announced my appointment as Chief. The tweets followed a specific denigrating and othering pattern. This is demonstrated aptly in the final tweet which read: “My hunch is that most jurisdictions in Western liberal democracies appoint experts in human rights law to lead their HR tribunals rather than wealth & real estate lawyers. Happy to be proven wrong on this but until then this is a case of negative Alberta exceptionalism.”

Applying the Study’s definitions, the postings would broadly fall under the rubric of cancellation. Considering the

Study's definition of cancellation, while the statements do not directly call out the target for a transgression such as racist, hateful, or unpatriotic statements, they do call out an alleged transgression in the form of an unqualified patronage appointment.

The above tweet specifically identifies my transgression using a calling out pattern that relies on an extreme formulation, comparing my alleged lack of qualifications to similar appointments in the entirety of "most jurisdictions in Western liberal democracies." This involves an extreme, even fanatical, moral catastrophizing that places the target in the binary role of the beneficiary of "negative Alberta exceptionalism" in opposition to the whole of the Western world.

To confirm the Study's findings and applicability, it is necessary to determine whether the post demonstrates political identity centrality. The evidence here is easily available. The author's social media pages and blog publications repeatedly praise the leftist Alberta NDP opposition while denigrating the governing right-leaning Alberta UCP.

As regards motivations, we must consider both the virtue signalling element of the calling out phase, combined with the social vigilantism that the Study correlated to the piling on phase, with special attention to the othering and educating aspects of social vigilantism.

The virtue signalling element is easily identified in the professor's efforts to publicly diminish my abilities and

shame the governing UCP. This effort demonstrates a clear virtue signalling effort aimed at his fellow NDP supporters.

In terms of piling on, the comments neatly correlate with the aspects of social vigilantism, including disseminating "superior attitudes and beliefs" and isolating the target for the purpose of "educating the ignorant other."

Ignoring my academic, international, and legal qualifications the tweets attempted to portray me as entirely ill-suited to the role. This speaks directly to the Study's findings on social vigilantism whereby the canceller seeks to disseminate "superior attitudes and beliefs" while "educating the ignorant other." As noted above, the author engaged in an extreme othering of the target in this case, but his own specialization and knowledge of the subject matter suggests that he was also attempting to bolster his self-efficacy due to his limited grasp of the subject matter. Indeed, despite the professor's claims to have an understanding of human rights and human rights bodies across the Western world, his academic specialization – resource law – is entirely unrelated to human rights, both as a legal and philosophic topic. Not only do the statements demonstrate an effort to disseminate the author's allegedly superior attitudes and beliefs while engaging in a severe level of "othering," but they also confirm the Study's identification of self-efficacy as a motivator in which the canceller, unaware of his own limited grasp of the concepts, attempts to shore up his man-

agement of concepts he does not understand.

## **2. Attack #2: Intersectionality No More**

Regarding the second attack, I will look specifically at a factor referred to in the Study regarding how those with high political identity centrality distort their own typical political commitments and identity when demands for cancellation are pressing. Here I refer to the Study's allusion to a further external study noting that, among other things, the more central politics is to an individual's identity, the more likely they are to "draw less on other identities like gender, race, or occupation." In this regard, I will consider the comments made by a professor of women's and gender studies.

One would expect that a professor in this field would be focused primarily on issues of gender, including those relevant to the first openly gay man appointed as Chief of the AHRC. Similarly, one would expect that such an individual, having no training or research interests in religion or Islamic Studies, would be inclined to moderate her views in favor of sexual orientation diversity. However, that was not the case with this particular academic. The explanation for this lies with the individual's own high level of political identity centrality. As with the retired law professor, the professor of gender studies is a politically affiliated academic, having received various government appoint-

ments while the NDP were in power in Alberta from 2015 to 2019.

During her attacks, the author targeted a specific theme that is particularly relevant. Upon learning that I was an openly gay man, the professor stated one could be "gay and intemperate and not suited to an adjudicative role." Apart from the recurrent theme of cancellers failing to consider or interrogate my qualifications or published decisions, the statement confirms the external finding referenced in the Study to the effect that those with high political identity centrality will draw less on other identities when engaged in cancellation, even when in the author's case, their expertise was in gender studies rather than religion or Islamic history.

One would normally expect that a professor of Women's & Gender Studies would be routinely aware of the challenges faced by gender and sexual orientation diverse individuals when seeking appointment to a government administrative office, and that such a professor would understand and express those challenges, especially in a province with a strongly conservative ethos. That this individual was willing to misrepresent the book review and denigrate a gay man with the standard homophobic trope of being intemperate confirms the Study's referenced findings that, when a high political identity centrality individual is engaged in cancellation, that individual will ignore other relevant identity markers that would not attract that individual's attention.

## Conclusion

Based on the application of the Study's definitions and findings to my own case of cancellation, I find that my own experience confirms significant elements in the Study and expresses a substantial concurrence with its findings. Moreover, given the high political identity centrality of the cancellers, my situation, especially as regards my cancellers' motivations, suggest that the Study is correct in correlating political identity centrality with a high proclivity to cancel.

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