



**JUST SAYING**  
by Stephen Kimber

## Free speech? Yes – and no

**A**m I *Charlie Hebdo*?  
I'm not sure.

Everything seems so simple... until it isn't.

In 1968 – when I was a naive, idealistic, 18-year-old first-year university student – suave, sophisticated Pierre Trudeau (he of the Just Society, the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation, Trudeaumania) pirouetted into Canada's top political job. I was smitten. I may have even joined the Liberal Party.

Two years later, the FLQ kidnapped British ambassador James Cross and murdered Quebec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte. No one seemed to know what to do, or what would/should happen next.

How far would you go to deal with the crisis, a reporter asked the prime minister?

"Just watch me," Trudeau replied.

A few days later, Trudeau imposed the draconian War Measures Act, suspended civil liberties, filled the streets of Montreal and

Ottawa with soldiers and tanks. The police misemployed their special powers to round up and detain, without bail or charge, close to 500 people, most of them non-violent intellectuals and artists who may have believed in sovereignty but not in using armed force to achieve it.

I was almost as instantly un-smitten. I never voted for Trudeau again. My disillusionment, in fact, probably pushed me to the lifelong left of the political spectrum.

And yet, 45 years on, it is hard not to wonder whether Pierre Trudeau's clearly arbitrary,

obviously anti-democratic actions changed the course of Canadian history – for the better. Although Canada is still in legitimate periodic peril as the democratic separatist political movement in Quebec waxes and wanes in popularity, the FLQ itself is, thankfully, long dead.

Is that because of Pierre Trudeau?

Life is complicated. It only seems more complicated as I get older. Consider Jian Ghomeshi.

Like most outside CBC's savant inner circle, I was shocked last fall when the public broadcaster suddenly fired its most successful and influential radio host. I was among those initially suckered by Ghomeshi's carefully scripted Facebook response in which he both confessed to a penchant for rough, consensual sex and claimed he was the victim of a vengeful former girlfriend.

That self-serving version of reality survived less than a quarter of a single 24-hour news cycle before *Toronto Star* headlines recast the

entire tale: there was not one jilted ex, but three young women, each independently claiming Ghomeshi had sucker-punched them in the face and/or choked them without warning or, certainly, consent.

The three became four, and then seven and then... I lost count. The police launched an investigation. Ghomeshi was charged, and then charged again as more women came forward.

With all the usual blah blahs and harrumphs about how none of the allegations have been tested in court, it all seems a simple slam punch-dunk.

Except...

The more we learn, the less the Ghomeshi case seems to me like simply another egregious example of bad behaviour. What the women described suggests a compulsive, almost pathological modus operandi, right down to the creepy complicity of Big Ears Teddy.

Does that matter? Should it? Can we condemn the behaviour while trying to understand what lies behind it?

Which brings me, in a strange and circuitous journey, back to *Charlie Hebdo*.

I consider myself a free speech absolutist. I have defended the right of vile anti-Semites like New Brunswick's Malcolm Ross to express their vile, anti-Semitic opinions in the name of freedom of expression.

And yet...

I find myself increasingly distressed by the ways in which our public discourse has descended into *ad hominem* attacks whose pointless point seems solely to provoke.

*Charlie Hebdo* exemplifies that too-modern tradition. Its not very funny caricatures of the prophet Mohammed (the depiction of whom some Muslims see as blasphemy) seem drawn for no purpose other than to eye-poke.

If January's massacre at *Charlie Hebdo's* Paris offices had not happened, I would have been hard pressed to imagine myself defending Charlie.

But it did happen. And that has changed the game. *Je ne suis pas Charlie*. But now I have no choice but to stand beside Charlie. Even if I don't like what he did.

It's complicated.

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**FEEDBACK**

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