

# Public discourse is in a 'toxic state', says B.C. public relations expert

James Hoggan is launching his book 'I'm Right and You're an Idiot' at SFU's Centre for Dialogue on May 25

By Gavin Fisher, [CBC News](#) Posted: May 22, 2016 9:23 AM PT Last Updated: May 22, 2016 2:53 PM PT



Demonstrators have a heated discussion with a supporter of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump outside a campaign rally at the Holiday Inn Express hotel on March 29, 2016 in Janesville, Wisconsin. (Getty Images)



[Public discourse is in a 'toxic state', says B.C. public relations expert 21:35](#)

- [I'm Right and You're an Idiot book](#)

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Online comments, the US presidential primaries and MP's in the House of Commons this week — those are all examples of what public relations expert James Hoggan calls the "toxic state of public discourse."

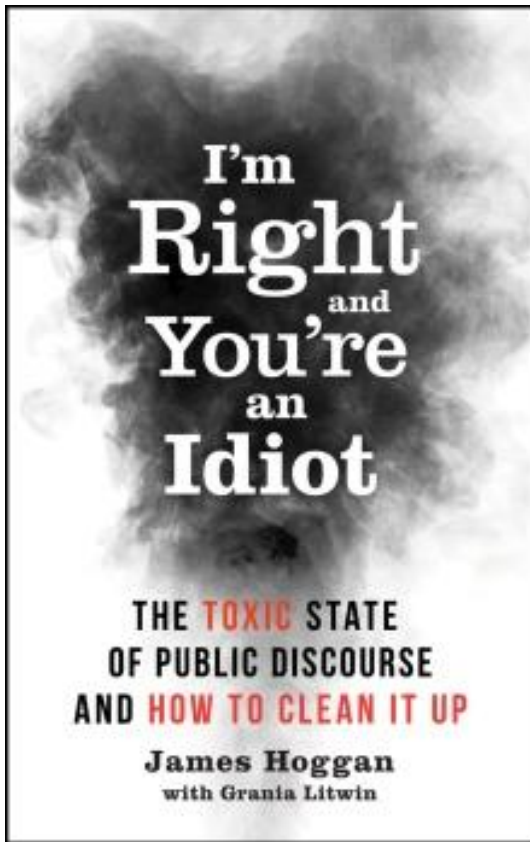
"We are better at getting ourselves into a state of unyielding one-sidedness than we are at finding common ground," said Hoggan, president of the Vancouver PR firm Hoggan & Associates and Chair of the David Suzuki Foundation.

"We need more reporters, we need more journalists, and they need more time to be digging into these issues and [going] beyond the kind of name-calling and the kind of rhetoric on the surface." - James Hogan

"We have this tendency — rather than just relying on the strength of our argument — to attack people's motives and character and pretend that that's a debate. So what that ends up up[ doing is putting us in a situation where we're in gridlock and we're unable to have a public conversation about serious problems about some of the issue that we face."

## 'I'm Right and You're an Idiot'

Hoggan said his new book — [I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean It Up](#) — was inspired by events several years [ago known as 'climategate'](#), when scientists warning against climate change were drowned out by what he called "political operatives who had no evidence on their side."



James Hoggan's book is being launched at SFU's Centre for Dialogue on May 25. (James Hoggan)

He said this type of public discourse gives the public a feeling of despair.

"If everything looks like it's an endless fight between people who never really want to hear what the other side is saying then people feel that whatever they do is not going to make much of a difference, because leaders in government and leaders in business really aren't going to do anything anyways."

He said that media have a role to play in this — as evidenced by the way climate change has been covered by journalists over the last 15 years, in what he calls a "fake debate."

"It's almost like the media were working for propaganda outfits that were trying to ... argue that climate change wasn't the problem, or that scientists weren't saying it's a problem," he said.

## Dialogue vs. debate

"We need more reporters, we need more journalists, and they need more time to be digging into these issues and [going] beyond the kind of name-calling and the kind of rhetoric on the surface."

Shauna Sylvester, the executive director for the Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University, said "We need extensive tools to try and turn the tide on this kind of polarization."

"I'm a trained debater. I know how to go for the jugular, I know how to listen, find the gaps in someone's argument, and go for it and try to win the argument," she said.

"Dialogue ... is the exact opposite of that. It's about listening deeply, it's about finding the centre of what people are saying, it's trying to build on people's arguments, and trying to find solutions."

"It's a very different mindset, and I think we need more dialogue, more conversation in our society."

*With files from [B.C. Almanac](#)*

*To hear the full story listen to the audio labelled: [Public discourse is in a 'toxic state', says B.C. public relations expert.](#)*