

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IS CLOSING AUSTRALIAN MINDS

Free speech is under hostile attack from populist campaigns for social reforms

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When politicians conflate free speech and physical harm, people come to believe that violence is a righteous response to free speech. Increasingly, politicians are conflating politically incorrect ideas and violence as part of populist campaigns for social reform.

PC populism is fostering a culture hostile to political dissent and the core principles of liberal democracy.

In the US and Australia, sections of the left have become

isolationist by rejecting the enabling principles of liberal democracy such as free thought and political diversity.

PEW research found that 44 per cent of Democrats with a college degree or higher said "a friend voting for Trump would put a strain on the friendship". In the Democrat sample, people who identified more strongly with left ideology were less tolerant of political diversity. A total of 47 per cent of Democrats who identified as "liberal" said finding a friend had voted for Trump would put a strain on their friendship.

By contrast, 73 per cent of Democrats identified as conservative or moderate said a friend voting for Trump would not have any effect on their friendship.

PEW researchers found also that compared with Republicans, Democrat voters are more likely to feel stress when they hear political views that dissent from their own. The researchers concluded that: "A large majority of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (68 per cent) say they find it to be stressful and frustrating to talk to people with different opinions of Trump. Among Republicans and Republican leaners, fewer (52 per cent) say they find this to be stressful and frustrating." More women (64 per cent) than men (54 per cent) found it stressful to speak with people who held a different view about Trump.

For decades, free thinkers have warned about the corrosive effect of political correctness on Western culture and democracy. In his best-selling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom predicted that politicising the curriculum would rob students of their capacity to reason. As a consequence, they would be ill-

prepared to advance democracy.

In *Intellectuals and Race*, Thomas Sowell analysed the negative impact of race politics on university culture and academic performance. In *Tenured Radicals*, Roger Kimball demonstrated how political correctness had corrupted the purpose of higher education. Numerous books and studies published since demonstrate the importance of teaching students how to think. Yet the preference for politically correct pedagogy and curriculum persists.

The gradual closing of the Western mind has left the liberal foundations of modern democracy in a state of disrepair. Recent research by the Brookings Institute found that half of undergraduate students think it is acceptable to silence speech they feel is upsetting. Students who vote Democrat are far more likely than Republicans to support silencing speakers they oppose by shouting them down (62 per cent to 39 per cent, respectively). The most alarming

finding is that almost one-fifth (19 per cent) of undergraduates think it is acceptable to use violence to silence speakers whose views they oppose.

The claim that free speech causes actual harm is creating a counter-reaction where violence is considered an appropriate response to words that offend. The conflation of speech and harm is codified in laws such as section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act. However, the culturally corrosive idea is spreading to other areas of policy and legislative reform.

In the debate over same-sex marriage, left-wing politicians claimed that honouring the electoral commitment to a plebiscite on marriage reform would lead to the suicide of gay youth. Greens leader Richard di Natale said: "We know that if a plebiscite is to go ahead that young people are at risk ... we will most likely see young people take their lives if this plebiscite goes ahead and the hate that will come with that is unleashed."

Labor leader Bill Shorten led the campaign against a free people's vote on same-sex marriage by appealing to rank emotionalism. He said: "A No campaign would be an emotional torment for gay teenagers and if one child commits suicide over the plebiscite, then that is one too many."

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As it happens, the people's vote on marriage reform is under way and free speech has not killed anyone. However, the conflation of dissenting thought and gay suicide has produced a highly charged climate where free speech is equated with violence. While there have been serious attacks since the bal-

lots were posted, almost all were committed by Yes voters. A violent assault of a Yes voter allegedly did occur after he tried to stop a man removing same-sex marriage posters. However, in most of the reported incidents, the aggressors were same-sex marriage advocates.

At Sydney University, activists attacked a group of people from various religions who were holding a food stall to discuss the No campaign.

Thousands of people signed an online petition to deregister GP Pansy Lai after she appeared in an advertisement supporting traditional marriage. An employer fired a young woman after discovering her support for traditional marriage online. And last Thursday, former Australian prime minister, Tony Abbott, was violently assaulted by an anarchist wearing a Yes vote sticker.

In discussions online, people are justifying attacks on same-sex marriage dissenters using the

same rhetoric as Shorten and di Natale. They believe that freedom of speech and conscience constitute violence. If politicians lead people to believe that dissenting from same-sex marriage will kill gay youth, it might seem reasonable to strike a political dissident. By conflating same-sex marriage dissent and youth suicide, Bill Shorten and Richard di Natale have made it comfortable for people to put on their rain-coats and attack No voters.

There is a recurrent fantasy among the politically correct that a regime of mental hygiene will protect us from harm. A desire for mental hygiene is invariably a bad omen. In peacetime, it makes people boring. In times of unrest, it fosters totalitarian beliefs about human perfectibility. The only forms of speech that should be prohibited are defamation and incitement to physical violence. The rest — the good, the bad and the ugly — is the sound of democracy.