

**Hounded by moral crusaders of the new inquisition.** By *Brendan O'Neill, Editor of Spiked in London.* 26 October 2014

**WHY is it bad to hack and expose photographs of a woman's naked body but apparently OK to steal and make public the contents of a man's soul?**

This is the question that should burn in our minds in the wake of the Barry Spurr scandal.

For just a few weeks ago, when a hacker invaded the iCloud accounts of female celebs and rifled through their intimate snaps, there was global outrage.

This theft of explicit private photos of actress Jennifer Lawrence and others was a sex crime, we were told. It was an act of misogynistic tyranny, proof that even women's private lives were not safe from the bulging eyes and clasp hands of a hateful, macho culture.

To peer into a woman's most intimate moments was a "sexual violation", said a writer for *Guardian Australia*. Just because these women were in the public eye, just because they "offer their image to public consumption", that didn't mean they were "trading (in) their intimacy", she said.

Fast forward to last week, and some of the same people whose jaws hit the floor at the audacity of those who leaked these women's private, unguarded pics were cheering the hacking of Spurr's private, unguarded words.

Spurr, a professor of poetry at the University of Sydney, has had his private emails pored over and published by pseudo-radical, eco-miserabilist website *New Matilda*. In some of his emails, in what he has since claimed was a cheeky competition between him and his friends to see who could be the least PC, Spurr used words that would no doubt cause pinot gris to be spilled if they were uttered at a dinner party.

He described Tony Abbott as an "Abo lover", referred to a woman as a "harlot", called Nelson Mandela a "darky", and used "Mussies" for Muslims and "chinky-poops" for Chinese. He now has been suspended by the university.

Many people will wince on reading those words. Just as we will have winced if we happened upon those photos of well-known women doing porno poses or engaging in shocking sex talk in videos shot by their boyfriends.

And that's because these behaviours, both Spurr's knowingly outrageous banter and the actresses' knowingly sluttish poses, share something important in common: they were private acts, not intended for public consumption. They were things done or said between intimates, far from the eyes and ears of respectable society. Yet where right-on commentators and tweeters stood up for the right of famous women not to have their private nakedness splashed across the internet, they have relished in the exposure of Spurr's soul to the panting, outraged mob.

Spurr's private thoughts are fair game for public ridicule, they claim, because of his position as a specialist consultant to the federal government's review of the national curriculum.

*New Matilda* says Spurr's standing as someone who could "influence what will be taught to every child in every school" means his intimate chatter is a legitimate target for moral policing. His private thoughts clash with his public duties, it says.

Imagine if this tyrannical insistence that everyone should have a spotless private life were taken to its logical conclusion. For a start, we might argue that it was legit to leak those female celebs' intimate photos on the grounds that they exposed the women's hypocrisy. Many of these actresses and singers are role models to young girls and pose as demure creatures in their work lives. But behind closed doors they get up to stuff that wouldn't look out of place in *Hustler*. Their private lives run counter to their public personas. Does that mean they should be exposed, mocked, ridiculed, made into quarry for pitchfork-wielding moralists? Of course not. And neither should Spurr.

No amount of faux-progressive lingo about exposing "institutional racism" in the upper echelons of Australian society can disguise the fact Spurr-bashing is an old-fashioned, McCarthyite hounding of someone for having a private life and private thoughts that fail to adhere to new orthodoxies.

The hounding of Spurr by an army of intolerant tweeters and hacks is Salem-like intolerance dolled up as a radical exercise in tackling racist attitudes.

*New Matilda* rather gave the game away when it said it had one aim — "cleansing the national curriculum review of the toxicity of this man's views".

Cleansing. What a word. It speaks to the true driving force behind the assaults on Spurr: an incredibly authoritarian instinct to rid the public realm of anyone whose outlook is not 100 per cent pure and decent, as defined by the new self-styled guardians of moral probity: so-called progressives, with righteousness in their hearts and rotten tomatoes in their hands. We need to face up to the seriousness, to the sheer intolerance, of the creeping new trend for punishing people for their private thoughts. It isn't happening only in Australia. In the US, Donald Sterling, a business magnate and owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team, was expelled from basketball earlier this year and turned into an object of international ridicule following the leaking of an entirely private phone conversation in which he said something disrespectful about black people.

In Britain, two football managers were sacked following the leaking of private emails in which they made juvenile jokes about gays and black people.

There is something Stasi-like in this moral policing of private speech. In the wake of the Sterling scandal, a columnist for *The Washington Post* said: "If you don't want your words broadcast in the public square, don't say them ... Such potential exposure forces us to more carefully select our words and edit our thoughts."

This is terrifying. It is a straight-up celebration of the kind of public denunciations of private deviancy that were encouraged under Stalinist regimes. Why don't we just put a *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-style telescreen in everyone's homes? That's surely the only way to ensure that no one misspeaks privately, and instead edits their thoughts and suppresses their more "toxic views", or risks finding themselves a target of "cleansing" by their betters. The haranguing of Spurr and others turns the clock back to a darker moment in human history.

During the Inquisition, people were regularly tried and punished for their private beliefs. The Enlightenment thinkers who came in the wake of that calamity insisted that such tyranny should stop. In the words of the great enlightened 17th-century English jurist Edward Coke: “No man, ecclesiastical or temporal, shall be examined upon the secret thoughts of his heart, or of his secret opinion.” Spurr is being punished for his secret opinion.

Coke’s enlightened view, his conviction that individuals must be free to think and say what they want in their private lives, is in mortal danger today. It’s being crushed by a New Inquisition, staffed by members of the chattering classes, inflamed by Twitter and assaulting not only individuals such as Spurr but also the very principles of privacy, autonomy and freedom of thought.

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