

Political correctness stifles vital debate

By Nic Cater, The Australian, 24 March 2015

How dare our Prime Minister slander the abstemious Irish, a sober, temperate and respectable people healthy of mind, body and soul! Surely we are beyond the days when it was OK to cast aspersions on the tight-fisted Scots, the leek-munching Welsh or the sheep-doting Kiwis.

That, at least, is the view of the earnest progressives for whom progress towards a more inclusive society requires us to become as humourless as the Germans, as bland as the Belgians and as smug as the French.

What Tony Abbott was really saying by linking St Patrick's Day with the consumption of Guinness, explained Tim Dick in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was that the Irish are "lively, useless drunks".

It was a reminder that "jokes which appear innocuous to the teller can be hurtful". Jokers like Abbott "don't think they're being racist", says Dick, who plainly sees himself as an authority on the subject.

The newly minted crime of casual racism

Abbott, it appears, was guilty of the newly minted crime of casual racism, a slur so subtle that ordinary people don't think it's racist at all.

The difficulty of defining casual racism may seem to be a defect, but as Ken Minogue says in his incisive book *The Servile Mind*, imprecision "makes the term 'racism' all the more useful as a tool of forensic attack and great caution is needed to avoid being charged with it".

How does one plead innocent against a charge of casual racism? You can't. Pleading innocence is what casual racists do because they lack the sensitivity to recognise their own guilt.

In the hands of the politically correct, an allegation of casual racism is a stop-writ to shut down discussion.

Racism, a sackable offence

Citizens are put on notice every time they open their mouths; racism, like misogyny, is a reputation-destroying accusation and often a sackable offence.

The expansion of the race-speech moratorium to cover not just biological racism but cultural matters too has meant that the discussion we badly need to have about the place of Islam in modern Australian society was smothered before it began.

The recent atrocities in Sydney, Paris, Copenhagen and elsewhere demand a response that goes beyond candlelit vigils and Twitter handles. Yet every attempt to get the heart of the issue is muzzled by the imprecise rules of political correctness.

The damage from faux-tolerance

In Britain, however, some are now waking up to the damage this faux-tolerance is doing to the social fabric.

Last week Trevor Phillips, former chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, made some frank confessions in a Channel 4 documentary, *Things We Won't Say about Race That are True*.

Phillips confessed he had once believed that if a government tackled discrimination with enough vigour, racial and religious divisions “would just melt away in time because, after all, we were the same under the skin”.

The London Tube bombings of July 7, 2005, forced him to think again.

“We were faced with a single devastating question: if our multicultural dream was working so well, why had this happened?” he wrote in a preview to the documentary in *The Sunday Times*.

Multiculturalism is beautiful in theory

Phillips says while multiculturalism is beautiful in theory, in practice it is “a racket in which self-styled community leaders bargained for control over local authority funds that would prop up their own status and authority”. Meanwhile, the communities they claimed to represent “were steadily shrinking in on themselves, trapping young people behind walls of tradition and deference to elders”.

The perverse and unintended consequence of the pursuit of diversity “is that our political and media classes have become terrified of discussing racial or religious differences”, writes Phillips.

The result has been frightening

The systematic grooming, sexual abuse and trafficking of young girls by gangs of mainly subcontinental men in Rotherham, Sheffield and other cities went unchecked for years because the authorities were frightened of being labelled racist.

“We find it more and more difficult to address real problems in our society because we are afraid to describe them,” says Phillips. “And we have to face the political consequences of our mealy-mouthed approach to race.” The fear of frankness is not confined to Britain, says Phillips. It is fuelling the growth of “angry, nativist political movements” across Europe where “the po-faced political correctness that cramps all the conventional parties is allowing these frauds to get away with it”.

Phillips concludes: “If we are to tackle the problems of racial equality, we at least have to be able to name the problem.”

The British, says Phillips, must “become more ready to offend each other”.

There are, fortunately, no signs of an insular, jingoistic political force coalescing around an anti-immigration sentiment in Australia. Yet there is no room for complacency, particularly when the Australian political class is squeamish about candid discussion.

In an ideal world, our diversity and inclusiveness professionals, such as Race Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane, would be helping us through this minefield. Like Phillips, who once occupied a position similar to Soutphommasane, they would clarify the distinction between out-and-out racial prejudice and the legitimate discussion of cultural tensions.

Policing the boundaries of acceptable speech

Instead, our race-relations experts have put themselves on frontline duty, pencil and notebook in hand, policing the boundaries of acceptable speech.

After a series of anti-terror raids last September, Soutphommasane lectured against “ill-judged statements that have inflamed sentiments” against Muslims, before giving politicians a stern ticking off.

“There is a special responsibility for our elected representatives to set an example,” he wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. “No one benefits from ignorant rabble-rousing. Social cohesion mustn’t be sacrificed for sound bites.” No names, no pack-drill. Just an open-ended rebuke against “the tone of leadership” and a warning “not to judge entire communities by the actions of extremist minorities”.

The unelected Race Commissioner

The Race Commissioner, then, has taken it on himself to determine what can be said about Islam and the manner in which it is said. No one elected him, he can’t be sacked and those he rebukes find themselves reliving the experience of K in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*.

“But I’m not guilty,” said K. “There’s been a mistake.”

“That is true,” said the priest, “but that is how the guilty speak.”