

The Empire of Offence laying free speech to waste

By Brendan O'Neill, *The Australian*, 22 August

As of this week, Coles supermarkets across Australia will no longer sell *Zoo Weekly*, the silly, saucy mag for teenage lads. This decision follows months of campaigning by anti-porn outfit Collective Shout, which says *Zoo Weekly* is “highly offensive”.

Also this week, loudmouth Labor leader turned loopy columnist Mark Latham quit his writing gig at *The Australian Financial Review* over what some describe as his “deeply offensive” views on “feminism and other social issues”.

This follows weeks of heated debate over American rapper Tyler the Creator. He cancelled his Aussie tour following a campaign to keep him out of the country on the basis that his lyrics are “offensive to women”.

Campaigners have been badgering the Immigration Minister to revoke the visa of this “incontrovertibly offensive American”, as *The Sydney Morning Herald* called him.

Being offensive is now a risky business in Oz

It's official: being offensive is now a risky business in Oz.

Whether you're a jokey mag for awkward 15-year-olds, a former politician angry about new social movements, or a rapper who loves winding people up, you're no longer allowed to give offence. Do so, and you could find yourself ejected from polite society, maybe even kept out of the country, as if you were diseased.

To get to Oz, I had to assure your authorities I was free of communicable diseases; perhaps future visa forms will demand to know if I am “incontrovertibly offensive”. “Sorry, mate, you can't come in: offensive people not allowed.”

Zoo Weekly, Mark Latham and Tyler the Creator share something important in common. None of them committed criminal acts. None incited violence. They merely expressed views that rattled people's sensibilities. And for that they've been harshly rapped on the knuckles.

Australia has been recolonised by the Empire of Offence

Australia, it pains me to say, has been recolonised. Not by the Brits but by the Empire of Offence.

Already well-established in Europe, where you can be arrested and even jailed for saying outre things, and spreading like a bossy blob across American campuses, the Empire of Offence is now consuming Oz, too. And for those of us who have always looked lovingly at Australia as a free-speakin' nation, where everyone has a fair go and the C-word can be a term of endearment, this is really sad. If even Australia can fall to the culture of “You Can't Say That!”, nowhere is safe.

Across the West, taking offence is all the rage

Where earlier generations might have said, “I disagree with you, so let’s have it out,” today people are more likely to say: “I am offended by you, so I want you out of my newsagents, off Twitter and as far away from me as it’s possible for you to be put.”

On campuses in Britain and the US, students are setting up “safe spaces” in which offensive words and ideas may not be expressed.

Safety not from physical assault, but from ideas

In the US, some of these censorious cocoons, designed to protect students from ever hearing a cross word or strange idea, come complete with colouring books and soothing music — I’m not making this up — to induce a childlike feeling of supreme safety. Safety not from physical assault, but from ideas.

Many students now demand trigger warnings on books that might upset them.

Students at Columbia University in New York want even Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to come with a warning because that great poem mentions rape, which some might find offensive.

The kind of warning that was once only issued for television shows with gratuitous violence — “some viewers may find this show upsetting” — is now being stuck on classic works of literature.

In Europe, meanwhile, there are actual laws against offending or insulting certain groups.

In Sweden, a pastor was given a one-month suspended prison sentence for saying, in his own church, that homosexuality is a “tumour” — which is, of course, offensive to gays.

Brigitte Bardot fined for badmouthing Islamic ritual slaughter of animals

In France, actress turned animal-rights activist Brigitte Bardot has been fined €30,000 (\$46,800) for badmouthing the Islamic ritual slaughter of animals, which she considers barbaric.

And we wonder why we’re seeing the rise of nut jobs such as those gunmen who massacred the staff of the offensive magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. These guys were brought up on a continent where we’re constantly told that feeling offended is the worst thing ever, and we have the right to sue or silence or harass the person or thing that offends us.

The *Charlie Hebdo* killers are best seen as the armed wing of the Empire of Offence, the horrific logical conclusion to the institution of a new era of speech-punishing inoffensiveness.

And now the Empire of Offence has come to Oz. Sometimes it is enforced formally by laws, such as section 18C, which forbids “offending” groups of people.

And sometimes it’s enforced informally, by Twitemobs or campaign groups keen to shush or even send packing anyone they consider “incontrovertibly offensive”.

The rest of society is infantilised

But either way, the end result is the same: eccentric individuals are silenced, which is always a bad thing, and the rest of society is infantilised, through being told that some ideas are just too dodgy, weird or outrageous for us to hear, and thus we must have our eyes and ears covered by Those Who Know Better. By the footsoldiers of the Empire of Offence.

Criminalising offensiveness is a really bad idea

Sure, the victims right now may be only people whom many of us agree are annoying. But we must remember that giving offence is often the engine of human progress.

From Copernicus's then-contrarian insistence that the sun was at the centre of our solar system to suffragettes usurping of the "natural order" with their demand for the right to vote, many of today's established good ideas started life as outrages against decency or normalcy.

"All great truths begin as blasphemies"

As George Bernard Shaw said, "All great truths begin as blasphemies."

If we quash offensiveness, and force field our societies against dangerous thinking, then we will create a sad, suffocating, risk-averse intellectual climate in which no great truths or breakthroughs are ever likely to be made.

Brendan O'Neill is editor of Spiked, and is in Australia this week to speak at the Centre for Independent Studies' annual Consilium conference. A collection of his essays, A Duty to Offend, is published by Connor Court this week.