

Europe's civilisation death wish

By Mark Christian, The Australian, 13 February 2016

Australians should feel unashamed about our immigration policies and instead fight the growth of identity politics and the undermining of free speech.

That's the message of provocative Canadian commentator Mark Steyn, who tomorrow begins an Australian speaking tour sponsored by the Institute of Public Affairs.

Free speech is at the heart of Steyn's message

He is surprised that the controversial section 18c of our Racial Discrimination Act is still standing when his own country successfully repealed the equivalent parts of its Human Rights Act in 2013.

"Free peoples are losing the habit of free speech," he says. "They're taught, not really just at university but in fact from kindergarten, that there is a correct view of certain subjects and that incorrect views are distressing. The last two generations raised in the Western world, they don't do that thing, the apocryphal Voltaire line, 'I disagree with what you say but I'll fight to the death for you to.' They'll fight to the death for you not to be allowed to say it."

The consequences can be disturbing. "People can actually lose the spirit of liberty and once you've lost that there are not a lot of easy paths back," he cautions.

Steyn says the initial reluctance of politicians and much of the media to acknowledge, let alone discuss frankly, events in Cologne on New Year's Eve or the growing problem of sexual assault in Sweden did nothing to preserve social cohesion but instead widened a democratic deficit between governments and the governed over the tide of asylum-seekers sweeping across Europe.

"Free speech is like being a little bit pregnant"

"Free speech is like being a little bit pregnant," he says. "You can't be a little bit free speech."

He talks of meeting people fleeing the Balkans as a journalist covering the wars that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia. "In Europe the whole migrant thing is basically open mockery of the whole idea of refugees," he says.

Steyn says EU leaders need to speak frankly about the forces now pulling people to the continent and how they are different.

He points to Africa. "People now have cell phones," Steyn says. They can see what's going on in the world. Even as recently as the 1980s their glimpse of life in the West came from reruns of *Dallas*.

It's a different world now

"It's a different world now. They can see in real time their cousin who got on a boat from Libya and wound up in Italy and walked over to Sweden. They're seeing in real time the kind

of life their cousin is living. What percentage of North Africa has to decide ‘We’d quite like to move to Europe’ for there to be no Europe?”

As a result, Steyn sees nothing wrong with Australia’s asylum-seeker policies. “Australia does what every country used to do until the 1960s. It reserves the right to pick and choose who it admits to within its borders.” He adds: “In effect, everyone in Australia is Donald Trump.”

But Steyn points to the different recent experiences of asylum-seeker flows of Europe and Australia. “Europe is basically as near to Africa as Australia is to Indonesia,” he says, describing the EU’s approach as “the equivalent of Australia telling everyone in Indonesia, ‘See you in Darwin on Tuesday’.”

Consequences of the uncontrolled flows of people

Steyn is blunt on the potential consequences of the uncontrolled flows of people. “If you lose control of your border you don’t have a country,” he says. In this environment, he is particularly concerned about the impact of identity politics and diversity policies that play on differences. He points to his experiences in the Balkans. “Once people start to think of tribal identities, you end up with tribal politics,” he warns. “It doesn’t matter if the tribe is Bosnians or Croats or whether its transgender and lesbians versus straight white males.”

Steyn jokes about “the Stanley Gibbons stamp collection approach to diversity” but says it is a trap that can cause divisions in wealthy, comfortable and largely homogenous societies, be they in Europe or our own.

“I raise my kids in New Hampshire which is 99.99999 per cent white,” he says. “I think there’s rumoured to be three black guys somewhere in the southern part of the state and two Hispanics. That’s it for New Hampshire.

“It gets kind of boring and people think wouldn’t it be nice to have bit of this and a bit of that. We live here and we’ve got all these people called Smith and Jones and all the rest of it. It would be much more interesting if we can have a bit more diversity. So look. There’s that nice gay couple who have moved into No 28 Victoria Gardens. And — ooh, aren’t we lucky now? There’s a nice fire-breathing imam who has moved into No 30.

“They can all meet. The fire-breathing imam can make conversation with the nice gay couple over the garden fence as they do on a Sunday afternoon.”

Turned diversity thing into a civilisational death wish

Then the joking ends. “The situation they’re now realising in Europe is that when you’re so boundlessly tolerant that you tolerate the avowedly intolerant then you basically have turned that whole kind of Stanley Gibbons diversity thing into a civilisational death wish,” Steyn says.

He warns against embracing the self-loathing that comes with the increasingly common use of concepts such as privilege and entitlement to delineate societal goodies and baddies — witting or not. “The minute you start using these things like privilege, what you’re doing is incentivising the most reductive kind of identity group politics,” Steyn says.

Here, he specifically references 18c and “what groups you can claim to be a member of” so before the law “what matters is not that you are a citizen like any other” but which “groups you have a purchase on”.

Then Steyn the joker takes over, riffing off the old story about Cromwell’s portrait painter and the wart to illustrate the folly of the feelings of guilt that rack the bien-pensants of the West.

“Nowhere is perfect,” he says, “but if you have basically a heroic national narrative as Australia does, there’s something psychologically unhealthy in obsessing on the warts to the exclusion of all else. What’s happening now is you say, well, we haven’t got enough warts.” Warming to his theme, he casts about for new sources of shame. “What a pity we haven’t got Hispanics,” he says. “That would give us a whole new wart, a whole great new oozing pustule sac in the middle of our forehead we could all feel bad about.

“That’s the craziness here. It’s Cromwell to the nth degree. ‘Don’t paint me warts and all. Just paint my warts and if I don’t have enough warts, add a few to my face. The more warts the better. That’s what we want. We want more warts!’ ”

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