

Neo-puritans strive to find offence — anywhere

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 3 February 2016

The mindset of neo-puritans

With January 2016 ticked off the calendar, it's worth reflecting how the past month has provided a window into the mindset of a burgeoning class of sanctimonious neo-puritans.

A few weeks back, West Indies cricketer Chris Gayle was just about run out of the country after an interview with a female sports presenter where he said: "Hopefully, we can win this game and have a drink after. Don't blush baby." Social media went nuts. The media, talkback, feminists went equally manic that Gayle would dare to flirt on camera. The cricketer apologised the very next day. But that made no difference to the remonstrating neo-puritans. The batting legend was labelled a sexist and a creep, his club fined him \$10,000, Cricket Australia boss James Sutherland said Gayle's on-camera flirting was "completely out of line and inappropriate". "It's very, very public," Sutherland said.

A few weeks later, NRL player Mitchell Pearce was caught on a smartphone video behaving like a drunken buffoon at a private party. But privacy made no difference to the censorious neo-puritans. Public lapse in judgment? Private indiscretion? The boundaries keep moving. There but for the grace of God go I has become there but for the grace of an iPhone go all of us. Pearce clumsily tried to kiss a woman who quickly rebuffed him. So he stopped. The half-back then simulated a dopey, jokey sex act on a dog. He urinated on a couch. Dumb and dumber.

No room for boofheads anymore

But in the minds of the neo-puritans, there is no room for boofheads anymore. Pearce is a villain. End of story. And villains must be publicly shamed. So there's endless talk of fines and penalties, contracts cancelled, careers over, rehab and counselling. Pearce has left the country. I am deeply uncomfortable to find myself on roughly the same side of the argument as Peter FitzSimons.

But here's where the Red Bandanna and I part ways. The progressive set that FitzSimons surely calls home is to blame for the rise of the holier than thou neo-puritanism that has tried to destroy Pearce. Australia's self-appointed moral guardians are having a heyday doing what they do so often: dividing the world into victims and villains. But can it really be that simple? There is something truly disturbing about the refusal by these self-appointed moralisers to make room for a few boofheads, be they drunk or flirtatious.

Even minor mistakes pathologised as serious moral misdeeds

To be sure, no one should celebrate stupidity. Pearce behaved badly. He has to account for that. But the obsession to label every misdemeanour or error of judgment as a sure sign of bad character points to a deeper malaise infecting our society. This false dichotomy of victims and villains is creating a sterile, puritanical world where even minor mistakes of judgment are pathologised as serious moral misdeeds.

Witness the weird explosion of academic literature and campus chatter about so-called micro-assaults, micro-aggressions, micro-insults, micro-invalidations and so on and so forth. So you've picked up a copy of *Hustler* magazine and looked at a naked woman? That makes you

a perpetrator of “micro-insults” — and a villain. Prefer to be colourblind to race so you don’t define people by their colour? That makes you a perpetrator of micro-invalidations — and a villain. You’d think that the very mention of “micro” points to how trifling this all is. Not in the eyes of the neo-naggers, who can find wrongdoing anywhere they look.

This realm of the utterly ridiculous

And it’s not hard to trace how we ended up in this realm of the utterly ridiculous. The misguided taxonomy between villains and victims was given a fillip once feelings entered the realm of human rights laws. Once an offending word here or an insulting word there attracted the heavy hand of the law, victimhood became a booming business. And given that victimhood works as a political philosophy only if there are villains, it’s not surprising then that Western modernity is stretching at the seams with newfangled classes of victims and villains.

You’re a Catholic archbishop from Tasmania who produces a pamphlet that defends the traditional definition of marriage that has not only existed for millennia but remains the law of the land? Most would think this is a complete non-story within a healthy democracy where freedom of speech and religion are basic rights. Wrong. Under the hectoring neo-puritanism, the law allows anyone offended by that pamphlet to claim victimhood status and, hey presto, the archbishop and his church are cast as villains by a human rights bureaucracy only too willing to play along.

We seem to have reached the point where every transgression from the norm now demands either a victim or villain label. There’s no room for plain difference or straight stupidity any more. And the victim/villain dichotomy has reached into absurd places when Gayle and Pearce were cast as villains even where there were no victims.

Neither Gayle nor Pearce broke any law. The police were not called. There was no harm done, as John Stuart Mill would have concluded.

John Stuart Mill: prevent harm to others

The 19th century English philosopher best explained the no harm principle when he said “That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”

Mill was addressing the importance of individual liberty in the face of state control. These days, the preachy neo-puritans imagine they are the state, imposing their judgments, wrecking reputations and careers because they have identified a villain even where there is no victim. No harm no longer matters to the neo-puritans. The principles that helped drive liberty have been upended.

Australia Day awards further cement victims and villains narrative

Last week, the honchos who hand out Australia Day awards tried to further cement the victims and villains narrative into our national psyche when they picked David Morrison as Australian of the Year.

Morrison, a military man, is not regarded as an extraordinary soldier. So why did he get the gong? He gave one famous speech about victims of discrimination (a speech written by his then speechwriter, Cate McGregor, who transitioned from a man to a woman a few years ago).

You might have thought that upon receiving the award, Morrison would defend this great nation, maybe explaining the importance of being committed to Western values such as individual liberty and so on. Wrong again. Morrison's Australia Day speech was replete with dark talk of victims and villains.

This false dichotomy

Not surprisingly, those who have fallen for this false dichotomy have bequeathed hero status on Morrison.

Those of us who see through the victim and villain baloney see a man of mediocre achievement given an award he didn't deserve. And his paean to progressive causes is a reminder of how far we have fallen as a proud nation.

The lionisation of Morrison and the concomitant destruction of Pearce suggest it's high time we did more to keep in check the rapacious colonisation of our communities by the neo-puritans. After all, the freedom to be a boofhead is the other side of the liberty coin.

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