

A new authoritarianism has descended

Neil Brown, The Spectator, 11 April 2016

A new authoritarianism has descended

There now seems to be a list of official beliefs we are allowed to hold and no others; decided for us by the new establishment that has taken hold in government and the media, especially but not only in Fairfax, the ABC and SBS where there is now a uniformly censorious tone that colours everything.

The very idea that you might hold a different opinion from the approved one is, to use the word that is now creeping into our discourse, ‘unacceptable’ and if you dare express it, what you get in reply is not a counter argument but a demand for an apology, the more humiliating and grovelling the better.

Behind the threats and intimidation

You will also be forced to resign from whatever post you occupy. And behind the threats and intimidation lurks the spectre of the thought police to enforce the approved view of what is acceptable and what is not. The advocate of unapproved views these days is simply bludgeoned into submission.

It is unacceptable that you might have a different opinion from the establishment on climate change, same-sex marriage, adoption by same sex couples, illegal refugees, abortion, the republic, the family, the sexual agenda in schools, foreign aid, religious freedom, government spending, freedom of speech, Israel, Islam and any proposal for changing the constitution.

You will be branded as a social leper

As views other than the official ones are unacceptable, what is also unacceptable is that you should be allowed to express them. Indeed, you run a terrible risk these days, not that you will have to defend your case on its merits, but that you will be branded as a social leper, shunned, stopped from holding a public meeting or setting foot inside a university, blacklisted, abused and ridiculed simply because you hold a personal view different from the official one that has been sanctified by the new establishment.

Were Voltaire alive he would find it easier to say: ‘I disagree with everything you say and will fight to the death to stop you saying it.’

An hysterical crescendo

The new authoritarianism has found a very fertile field in the denigration of Tony Abbott which has now reached an hysterical crescendo. He represents a separate strain of opinion from the mush that passes for policy in the Liberal party today and consequently must be stopped and silenced, not by logic, but by ridicule and abuse. He was probably doomed from the start by putting forward the uncomfortable truth in the 2014 budget that the country was living beyond its means and that surgery was needed before we went bankrupt.

Given that the new establishment depends on government spending and handouts, it was inevitable that the budget would be unacceptable and Abbott with it. But by that time, it was known Abbott also had a real commitment to socially conservative positions that bind the

society together, contributing to its stability. So he was doubly cursed and totally unacceptable. As the *Age* put it (before the staff went on strike and Fairfax shares went up), Abbott could not be allowed to stay in office and had to be 'checked'. Eventually this led to his removal, but now, he has to be silenced, his legacy degraded and, if that does not work, forced to leave the parliament altogether.

The PM belittles his predecessor's achievement

The most egregious example of this practice is the recent attempt by the PM to belittle his predecessor's achievement in stopping the boats bringing illegal migrants into this country. Turnbull's argument is that the boats were stopped, not under Abbott, but Howard. For Turnbull, the crazy excesses of Rudd/Gillard that allowed people smugglers back into business and Tony Abbott's successful response just did not happen.

This is little better than the whitening-out of any inconvenient facts by Turnbull that might diminish his own wondrous lustre. Worse, you would think that Turnbull would have at least an ounce of feeling that here was a policy of which Abbott was justly proud and would allow him this one tick of approval. But no, the *zeitgeist* is that Abbott and all his works are bad and Turnbull has to deliver the cruellest cut of all.

Guilty of the unacceptable sin of loyalty

Abbott's supporters, guilty of the unacceptable sin of loyalty, are now condemned and abused as malcontents, subversives and troglodytes; forget about the arguments, just abuse the advocate. I hope they speak out more, because they contribute to the robust debate of ideas, whether you like their opinions or not.

Then we have seen the unedifying spectacle of the Liberal Party itself promoting the line that Abbott should not stand again for election, campaign in the election, speak at conferences or even write articles. You would think that any political party with a former leader who had brought it back from disintegration and got it into government would show gratitude, welcome his experience and invite him to contribute to the debate.

A party now with no sense of tradition or respect

Instead, we see a party, now with no sense of tradition or respect, full of midgets who sold their souls for the exalted post of assistant minister or parliamentary secretary, and wailing like a Greek chorus, trying to destroy him.

No-one seems prepared to say it, but such an attitude is mean, ungenerous and, above all, foolish, for it cuts the party off from the conservative point of view that Abbott represents and many people want to see promoted. Worse still, it shows how the new authoritarianism is eating away at the free exchange of ideas that used to be one of the Liberal party's – and the country's – great strengths.