

## Offended Left claims exclusive right to freedom of expression

By Gerard Henderson, The Australian, 15 October 2016

And so it has come to this. Ben Eltham, a Deakin University academic and national affairs editor for the left-wing newsletter *New Matilda*, has taken ABC political editor Chris Uhlmann to the ABC's complaints department.

On September 29, following Uhlmann's article about the recent power blackout in South Australia, Eltham tweeted: "I've lodged a complaint with the ABC about this Chris Uhlmann article on the SA blackout. I argue it is inaccurate."

In a series of rants on Twitter, Eltham accused Uhlmann of "pushing an anti-renewable line".

In fact, in his article on one of the biggest power failures in Australian history, Uhlmann did not oppose renewable energy. He simply pointed out that certain engineering problems can arise as power grids use less base power (coal and gas) and more renewables (wind and solar). The Australian Energy Market Operator has yet to finalise its report on South Australia's "black system event". So, at this stage, it would be unwise to make conclusions in this area.

But not for Eltham. The academic and journalist has declared Uhlmann inaccurate and he has gone to the ABC's audience and consumer affairs department for a ruling. It's a bit like a student row being taken to the principal by one of the contending parties.

Eltham's action is but one manifestation of the growing intolerance within university social science departments and large sections of the media. Eltham works at a taxpayer-subsidised university. He has ample time, along with space in *New Matilda* and elsewhere, to argue the case about the present reliability of alternative energy. But Eltham does not want a debate or discussion in the area.

In an ideal world, academics would welcome the presence of a person such as Uhlmann. The ABC is a conservative-free zone without one conservative presenter, producer or editor for any of its prominent television, radio or online outlets. Uhlmann is not a conservative. But, on occasions, he does challenge the taxpayer-funded public broadcaster's close to universal attitude on how to deal with what is termed dangerous climate change.

Leftist social science academics such as Eltham do not want a pluralistic ABC. They want to hear and watch programs with which they agree. They want the ABC to preach the same "truths" that are preached in *New Matilda* about climate change and all that.

Never have the possibilities existed for so many individuals to participate in the public debate. Social media has made it possible for most citizens in democratic societies to state their positions. Yet the Left, which dominates Twitter, frequently uses social media to close down debate.

American novelist Lionel Shriver's recent appearance at the taxpayer-subsidised Brisbane Writers Festival is a case in point. Shriver was alleged to have spoken on a different topic to the one that had been agreed to with the organisers when she spoke about "fiction and identity politics". This remains disputed by Shriver, who says organisers had agreed to her topic.

In any event, this should have raised no problems. After all, an internationally acclaimed writer was in Brisbane speaking about what she wanted to speak about: namely, to argue against the fashionable Left's position that no one has the right to acquire the identity of another. In other words, that a white Anglo-Celtic woman has no right to tell a story about a black African man.

High-profile 25-year-old Yassmin Abdel-Magied was in the Brisbane audience. She did not like what she heard. Fair enough — that's supposed to be part of the writers festival experience.

She could have made a critical comment or asked a challenging question at the end of Shriver's address. Or she could have written a critique of the speech after the event. Abdel-Magied chose the second option but not the first. As she wrote in *The Guardian* on September 10, she walked out 20 minutes into the speech since to stay would "legitimise" Shriver's speech. On this basis, no one should be expected to listen to anyone with whom they disagree.

Needless to say, the Brisbane Writers Festival joined in the chorus and folded, deleting Shriver's address from its website. It's a strange position for a literary festival to adopt. After all, if rules against what is termed cultural appropriation had prevailed in days of old then Shakespeare's literary output would have been severely truncated.

Another aspect of the great silencing in the social media era has occurred with respect to private language. When Donald Trump made his offensive statements about women in 2005, he was wired up for a performance, so he should have known better.

The problem is that the fashionable Left wants to punish those who engage in private conversations or correspondence if it is regarded as offensive by some who readily take offence, often on behalf of others.

Take Barry Spurr, who resigned as professor of poetry at the University of Sydney on account of alleged racist and sexist comments in email exchanges with a friend, for example. It seems Spurr's emails were hacked by a person or persons unknown and handed to New Matilda's Wendy Bacon, who revealed them to the wider media. Spurr was suspended from the university, then resigned on terms that were undisclosed.

As Spurr pointed out in a considered speech last week, the "private jabs" of poet Philip Larkin in correspondence with Kingsley Amis are only one aspect of his complicated personality. However, those who dare to crack a joke in private capable of offending someone "are vilified in language of an intensity and extremity" that would have once been reserved for serious offenders. Reputations are destroyed and careers ruined.

Nowadays members of the intelligentsia — which gained so much from freedom of speech — are using their privileged positions to increasingly call for the curtailing of dissenting opinions.

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