

## The war on free speech has just begun

By Mark Steyn, *The Australian*, 19 October 2016

One of the reasons I'm in favour of Hillary Clinton being decisively defeated next month is because a Democrat victory, bolstered by a five-four (or six-three, or seven-two) majority on the Supreme Court, will be disastrous for free speech in the United States.

President Barack Obama has just declared that the "wild wild west" of the internet has to be "rebuilt" to "flow" through "some sort of curating function" — because apparently the ever less subtle filtering of Big Social (the Twitter and Facebook monopolies, the Standard Oil of our time) are no longer enough.

What's next? As I had cause to remind the Democrats during my Senate testimony, too many prominent members of their party are already wholesale enthusiasts for the criminalisation of dissent — a position that renders politics both irrelevant and impossible.

Think of the most repressive safe-spaced college campus in America: that's where the whole country's headed.

In Britain, the Commonwealth and Europe, things are trending even worse. It was a sad day for me when Tony Abbott, the then Australian prime minister; George Brandis, the current Attorney-General; and Julie Bishop, the current Foreign Minister (all of whom had been enthusiastic attenders of my Aussie appearances, and one of whom is a big fan of my book on musicals, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight*) abandoned their commitment to amend section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act. To me, that disgusting "hate speech" ersatz-law is an utter embarrassment to a supposedly free society; to Abbott's ministry, free speech was merely an "unnecessary complication".

Well, it's certainly "complicating" Bill Leak's life. *The Australian's* cartoonist is the latest to be ensnared by section 18C, for the cartoon that appears on this page.

- [MORE: Behead threat okay, cartoon not?](#)

As a previous target, Andrew Bolt, writes: "First two of my own articles were banned. Then seven Queensland students were sued by a staffer at their university for complaining that Aboriginal-only computers were racist. And now cartoonist Bill Leak is being attacked under this same wicked Racial Discrimination Act. When will the Turnbull government get the guts to at least try to scrap this wicked law?"

Good luck with that. Among the more fatuous observations of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in recent months was this: "It (repealing section 18C) is not going to create an extra job, it is not going to ensure your listeners will get to work, or school, or get around their business any sooner, it's not going to build an extra road."

The tinny sound of a hollow pseudo-technocrat unmoored from the core principles of liberty.

One of the more depressing moments of my Australian tour a few months ago was a private dinner with a handful of prominent conservative parliamentarians — by which I mean men and women to the right of Turnbull.

The most eminent among them declared confidently that scrapping 18C was “not a first-order priority”.

We then moved on to discuss what he regarded as the first-order priority, Islamic terrorism in Australia and elsewhere.

I pointed out that one of the reasons the former (free speech) most certainly is a first-order priority is because, without it, the latter (Islam and the west) cannot be honestly addressed.

Theodore Dalrymple a decade ago: “Steyn is right that the main struggle is one of ideas. Unfortunately, political correctness, which is to thought what sentimentality is to compassion, means that the intelligentsia of the West has disarmed itself in advance of any possible struggle.”

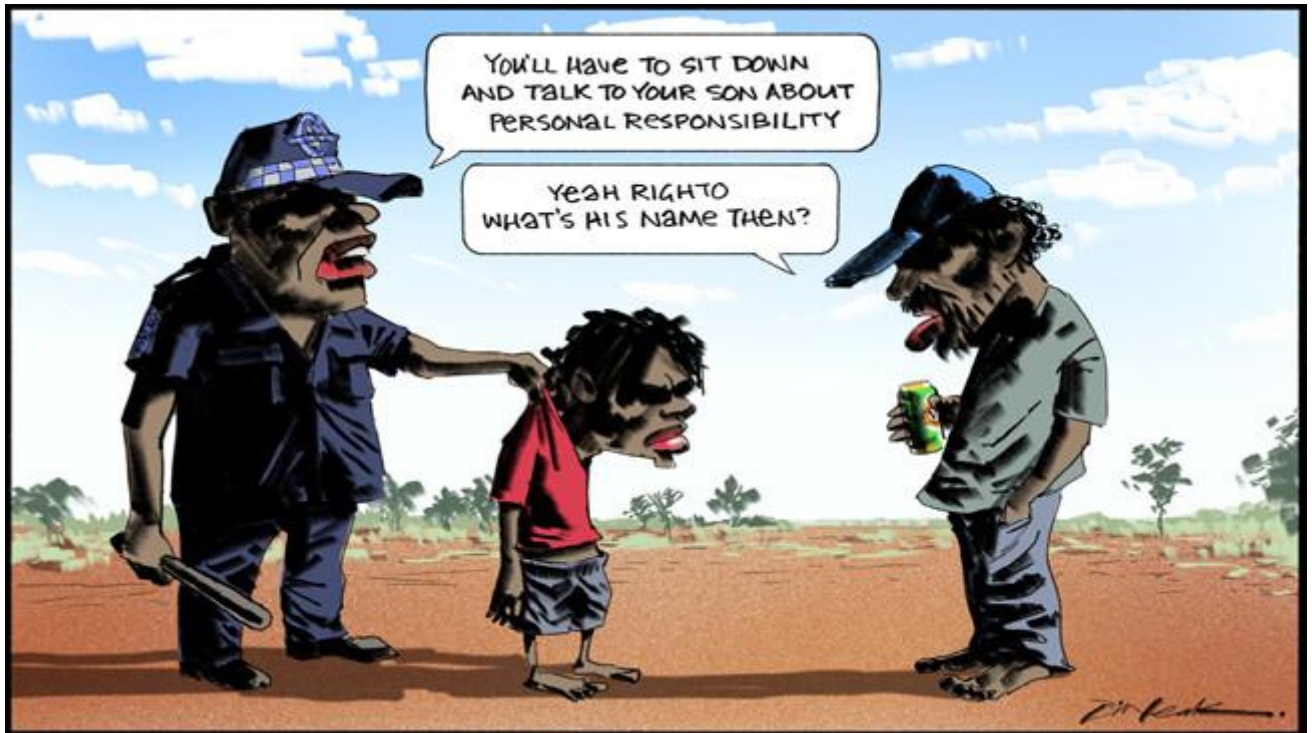
Political correctness enforced by state power has castrated public debate on the supposed “first-order priority” of our time — to the point where the Dutch courts prosecute opposition politicians over their election platforms, the French courts prosecute novelists over things their fictional characters said, the British police investigate Twitter jokes ... and once free peoples have so internalised these constraints that, even without state intervention, a supposedly free press punishes even the most footling departure from conventional bromides with public humiliation and career derailment.

Free speech is always a first-order priority — because, without it, you can’t truly discuss any of the others.

Dalrymple’s diagnosis — that political correctness is to thought as “sentimentality is to compassion” — applies surely to Australian Aboriginal policy.

Leak’s cartoon arose in the context of a specious ABC expose of ill-treatment of Aboriginal youths that panicked Turnbull in nothing flat into announcing a royal commission to look into it.

Apparently, unlike free speech, this does “create an extra job” — at least for royal commissioners.



Bill Leak's cartoon in this paper is under attack via the Racial Discrimination Act.

Other than that, the story was a near perfect illustration of the shrivelled, cowed terms in which this issue is framed. Leak's mistake as a cartoonist was to assume that Australia was still a free country in which one could widen those terms.

But I hope *The Australian* won't compound that mistake by vigorously defending the cartoon on its merits. When *Maclean's* and I ran afoul of the equivalent Canadian law — Section 13 — over a book excerpt from *America Alone*, the most important decision we made was not to defend the content of the piece: the facts, the quotes, the statistics, the conclusions, etc.

Our opponents were not disputing our position; they were disputing our right to have a position. Likewise, Leak's opponents are not attempting to engage him in debate; they're attempting to close down the debate.

And there's no point getting in a debate with someone whose only argument is "Shut up — or else."

In that sense, the Australian "human rights" regime and the *Charlie Hebdo* killers are merely different points on the same continuum: They're both in the shut-up business, and they shut you up *pour encourager les autres*.

They know that, for every cartoonist they silence, a thousand more will never peep up in the first place.

So this isn't a debate about Aboriginal policy or Islamic imperialism or anything else. It's a debate about whether we're free to debate.

I take the view that the Australian state, like the Canadian state, should not be in the shut-up business. And, when they are, it's they who are the issue, not you. When it's a contest between a book or cartoon, on the one hand, and on the other a guy who says, "You can't say that!", it's

the latter who's on trial. If you're on the side that's saying "Shut up!", you're on the wrong side.

In fairness to my tormentors at Canada's "human rights" commissions, they had the good grace for the most part at least to pretend to be sheepish about the totalitarian powers they wielded.

By comparison, their opposite number Down Under, "race discrimination" commissar Tim Soutphommasane, is an aggressive, in-your-face activist.

For example, at the height of the summer of terror (Orlando, Nice, etc), the co-presenter of Oz's *Dancing With the Stars* suggested it might be prudent to restrict Muslim immigration.

Commissar Soutphommasane pronounced: "This stereotyping of Muslims does nothing but breed hate, as @DavidCampbell73 says — let's speak out against it".

To which I responded: "Let's speak out against hack state apparatchiks singling out freeborn citizens for today's 3min hate #AustraliasWitchfinderGeneral".

Commissar Soutphommasane's tweet is not the voice of — to be quaint about it — a civil servant, a public servant, a servant of the Crown. Whichever of those formulations you prefer, you'll notice the word they all have in common. If commissar Soutphommasane wants to be a social-justice warrior, he should bugger off and do it on his own dime.

He is not an activist; he is a bureaucrat who wields state power. And it is not a small thing when the government of Australia singles out private citizens for Orwellian hatefests.

In the case of Leak, Australia's Hatefinder-General sent out a general audition call for "victims". As Tim Blair writes: " 'Our society shouldn't endorse racial stereotyping of Aboriginal Australians or any other racial or ethnic group,' the Race Discrimination Commissioner told Fairfax Media.

"Fairfax's report, which appeared online the same day Bill's cartoon was published, noted Soutphommasane's belief that 'a significant number' of people would agree the cartoon was a racial stereotype of Aboriginal Australians, and also included this line:

" 'He urged anyone who was offended by it to lodge a complaint under the Racial Discrimination Act.'

"This is extraordinary. The Human Rights Commission is now preparing to sit in judgment in a case clearly already decided by one of the HRC's most senior officials. As Homer Simpson once asked: 'Who made you Judge Judy and executioner?' "

Yet commissar Soutphommasane does it all the time, dispensing from his cosy sinecure drive-by justice to whoever catches his eye.

When I was in Australia a few months ago, his target was a young lady called Alice Kunek, a basketball player, who went to a fancy-dress party as Kanye West. Because she's a big fan of Kanye West, not because she's hoping to quit the basketball business for a touring minstrel show.

Here's what I had to say when I joined Tarsh, Joe, Carlotta, Jess and Denise on the sofa of Channel Ten's *Studio Ten*:

"I'm basically a believer in absolute freedom of speech because I think the alternative is worse.

“This fuss about the basketball player that we’ve had in the last few days, essentially for going to a fancy-dress party: You’ve got a government official — whatever it is, the federal race commissioner — advising Australians on what’s appropriate to go to a fancy-dress party in.

“I think that’s very disturbing for 25-year-old people to be told by the government of Australia that they’re mediating your fancy-dress costumes. So I think the solution is actually worse than the problem.”

I was pleased to see that sitting next to me on the sofa Carlotta, the Queen of Kings Cross, whose costumes have been fancier than most over the years, was nodding vigorously during the above.

How did it become normal for the government of Australia to have a position on what you wear to a fancy-dress party?

And isn’t the idea of this bureaucrat Soutphommasane hectoring a young lady with the full power of the state behind him way creepier than whatever her offence is supposed to be? How did “human rights” become a synonym for arbitrary state power over costume parties?

The likes of commissar Soutphommasane are not interested in a debate with you; they’re interested in eliminating you from the debate, banishing you from public discourse, and shrivelling that discourse to the ever tighter bounds of a state ideology.

I hope Leak and *The Australian* fight this outrageous system not through narrow lawyerly arguments but out in the open — shining a bright cleansing sunlight on an ugly regime that cannot withstand exposure to the light of day.

A final quote from *The Economist*, during my own difficulties with this malign travesty of “human rights”:

“Much of Canada’s press and many broadcasters are already noted for politically correct blandness. Some fear that the case can only make that worse. Mr Steyn and others hope it will prompt a narrower brief for the commissions, or even their abolition. As he put it in his blog, ‘I don’t want to get off the hook. I want to take the hook and stick it up the collective butt of these thought police.’ ”

Canada’s Section 13 was eventually repealed. If I can get my hook past Australian Customs, I would be honoured to assist Leak in performing the same service for Australia.

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