

## **The censorious, mollycoddled environment of modern academe**

By Nick Cater, *The Australian*, 17 January 2017

As if Australia Day isn't dangerous enough for the culturally insensitive, we are now advised not to celebrate the Australian belief in mateship and the fair go. The language police at Macquarie University have declared these are dangerous stereotypes, generalised images of a person or group that "may have potentially harmful real-world consequences". The university's latest guide on correct speech also instructs Queenslanders not to stereotype those living south of the Tweed as Mexicans, implying that they are "hot-blooded, irrational, untrustworthy".

Extreme linguistic governance of this kind was once restricted to religious sects and the political fruitcake fringe. Today it is chillingly mainstream; universities see it as part of their duty of care to offer written guides, training courses and counselling on "appropriate" and "inappropriate" language.

Since one can never be sure about the latest rules, every utterance is potentially suspect. Irony and sarcasm must be avoided at all costs. "To talk about a 'huntperson spider' is an ostensibly humorous 'non-discriminatory' act of renaming," the Macquarie University guide intones. "The joke here nonetheless mocks serious uses of non-discriminatory language and the struggle for gender equity."

Incredibly, this is a statement of official policy at a major university, signed off, presumably, by the dean and other serious people. If perchance it is slipped past their guard they must remove it forthwith from the university's website, for the damage imposed by this passive-aggressive chin-stroking is considerable.

The regulation of speech is one of the maladies of academe investigated by British sociologist Frank Furedi in a new book exploring the infantilisation of students.

The notion that people in their late teens and early 20s could not be trusted to act as adults, and that university authorities should protect their moral welfare in loco parentis, disappeared in the wake of the campus radicals in the 1960s.

Furedi, once a campus radical himself, says today's academic paternalism is far more insidious. The baby boomer generation was taught that "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me". The millennial generation is warned constantly of the harm language causes "vulnerable" people. Indeed, they themselves are vulnerable and must be protected from the psychological damage presumed to flow from linguistic aggression.

To explain how yesterday's student militants evolved into today's moral guardians, Furedi describes the rise of a risk-averse culture where precaution and safety have become fundamental moral values.

"The term 'safe' signals more than the absence of danger: it also conveys the connotation of a virtue," he says.

"The representation of safety as an end in itself is integral to a moralising project of monitoring both individual and interpersonal behaviour."

Censorship became unfashionable in the late 1960s when it was seen as an instrument of repression. Today it has become a form of therapy, underpinned by a cultural script of vulnerability.

The adjective “vulnerable” has mutated into a noun. The downtrodden have been recast as “the vulnerable”; the wretched have become “the most vulnerable”; universities have been transformed from an intellectual adventure into safe spaces for “vulnerable students”.

We are right to worry about the resilience of those who emerge from these cosseted, hypersensitive campuses. The vulnerable are inclined to fatalism, since vulnerability presents as a permanent feature. They are seldom encouraged to draw on inner strengths to make themselves less vulnerable. Indeed, to suggest they should toughen up is condemned as victim-blaming, denying the vulnerable the ritualistic empathy to which they feel entitled.

Vulnerability, together with the ethos of survivalism — the modern belief that danger lurks around every corner — are the narratives that bolster the infantilisation of students. Hence the semantic tsars at Macquarie deem that the expression “Australians believe in the fair go” is not just distasteful but “potentially harmful” to non-Australians or to Australians who don’t think that way. The purpose of their rules is to develop “a university environment characterised by sensitivity to cultural diversity, and in which the number and seriousness of discriminatory experiences are reduced or eliminated”.

Censorship, like compulsory seat belts or fences around swimming pools, is a matter of public health and safety. So, when activist Maryam Namazie was banned from speaking at Warwick University, the student union justified itself with “language that would have done any risk manager proud”, writes Furedi.

“Researching Namazie and her organisation had raised a number of flags,” declared the students. “We have a duty of care to conduct a risk assessment for each speaker who wishes to come to campus,” they wrote. It is not the intended meaning of words but their supposed impact that matters. “Verbal purification is not simply directed at cleansing politically objectionable words but also at providing psychological relief,” Furedi concludes.

It may be too early to predict what lasting effect the censorious, mollicoddled environment of modern academe will have young graduates.

*What Happened to the University?* by Frank Furedi is published by Routledge and is available on Amazon. Nick Cater is the Menzies Research Centre’s executive director.