

# Essay: The End of Free Speech

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**One of the things I've learned in life is that disagreement can become an obsession where the more trivial the quarrel, the more hotly it's contested. Rational argument often rapidly morphs into frustration, anger, then hatred and escalation into conflict. Then books are burned and people rounded up and put in special camps.**



We value our places of learning, where rational debate can be heard, examined, discussed, challenged, and given moral and historical perspective, but if our universities don't get the balance right, then what hope is there for the rest of us?

Special interest groups compete for ground in the pursuit of social, political, cultural, religious, racial, sexual and gender justice should be heard — but not when rational debate is silenced by the demands of the few.

We value the right to exercise free speech, even when the idea is wrong. We do this because history reminds us we had to fight for it. There are places in the world where free speech results in imprisonment, torture and execution, which is why the right to free speech must be protected at all costs. No reasonable person would want a society where people are silenced or punished for their beliefs.

Banning speakers from universities because they might offend the sensibilities of special interest groups (precious students) or immature minds (precious students) is idiotic. Incidences of 'no-platforming' where speakers have been prevented from talking at universities is a trend causing consternation and concern for grown-ups. Germaine Greer,

a lifelong campaigner for women's rights and Peter Tatchell, a lifelong campaigner for gay rights have both fallen victim to the 'no-platforming' brigade, made up of youngsters in their late teens who exercise unreasonable censorship simply because they can! This behaviour is as wrong as it is unacceptable, and it is reminiscent of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China, where the youth (some as young as 12 and 13) were given a free hand to depose, imprison and punish communities' more experienced and knowledgeable elders.

Cancelling a Mexican themed evening, complete with Tequila shots, tacos, burritos and sombreros — ostensibly because it stereotyped Mexicans — goes beyond political correctness. It is the work of childishly immature pretend revolutionaries. Likewise, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, demanding the removal of a statue of the great colonialist and late 19th century diamond magnate that adorns Oxford University's Oriel College, an institution built and financed by said benefactor. Rhodes was also gay, but attitudes were very different in the late 19th century so I'm wondering if the kids who are so vociferous in bringing about his 21st century downfall may have once supported him.

The anti-Rhodes campaign was instigated by a black South African student, Ntokozo Qwabe, ironically, also the recipient of a Rhodes Scholarship which paid for his university fees. Equally ironic is that Mr Qwabe recently racially abused a young white waitress in his native Cape Town — he described the incident as "*so black... so beautiful.*"

Some of these tactics are reminiscent of 1930's Germany where trivial complaints could lead to arrest and a one-way trip to a concentration camp.

Universities in both the US, Europe and UK have responded to this new trend with diversity training for staff special facilities for the slightly different and 'safe spaces' for those of a particularly delicate disposition. Self-segregation for trans or gender-fluid students has been proposed which will insulate them from the harsher realities of the real world. Therein lies another irony — any kind of segregation, self-imposed or not, is still segregation by any other name and does nothing for the cause of integration, acceptance or understanding. One group's experience should not be inaccessible to members of another group.

The whole point of free speech is that people with different views and beliefs can express them so that they can understand one another. Where would philosophy or literature be without free speech? Where would civilisation be without free speech?

I admit I'm confused. I always thought university students were among the most liberal-minded people on the planet. It seems to me that students are now asking for more and more complex rules — certainly a change from the days when they wanted less of them!

For university authorities to give in to the increasingly bizarre demands of their students is to pay lip service to the assumption of the supremacy of their opinions — kids with no experience of the real world and insufficient knowledge of history and culture. It seems as though the lunatics really have taken over the asylum, and it must stop!

Can parents be blamed for wrapping their precious children in cotton wool, instead abdicating responsibility to the school curriculum?

Who is to blame for this topsy-turvy state of affairs? Should we blame the government's 'elf 'n safety jobsworths? Today's students seem such a fragile lot. Is their behaviour just a need to protest about something... anything... no matter how ridiculous? It seems as if today's educational elite harbour a sense of entitlement that borders on narcissism. Could

it be because easy and instant access to information spewed forth by social media causes teenagers to demand a perfect, yet impossible, society? Dissenters are branded cyber-bullies. For instance, incidences of anti-semitism on university campuses have increased markedly.

In another widely publicised incident, a young student was ostracised by his supposed peers because he refused to attend an ostensibly voluntary fresher's week 'rape awareness' seminar, his hopes, future and career now in ruins. Is this sort of mass bullying really justification of the marginalisation of freedom of thought and choice?

A new phrase has entered the fragile world of the delicate mind. 'Micro-aggression' is the buzz word applied to even a hint of non-compliance with the manifesto of the new and out of control mollicoddling Stasi.

Of course activists are entitled to protest — that is the essence of freedom of speech — but to claim that counter-arguments are a form of violence is not only wrong, but represents a new and insidious form of censorship. Prejudice must be proven by impartial adjudication, not a kangaroo court before proper investigation, the alleged offender punished without trial. Tutors, professors and university officials should not be put in a position where they are made to feel in fear of their jobs.

Universities are now so nervous about the possible actions of their students that 'trigger warnings' are posted in case anything in a textbook offends or upsets the precious darlings. This is understandable in the case of a gruesome description of violent rape or murder, but ridiculous if the text is an account of historical fact.

It has been said, and oft repeated, that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Vigilance is what's needed right now in the face of this new and stealthy form of creeping intolerance. Universities must not be allowed to become centres of prohibition and censure.

Surely the main purpose of going to university is to prepare for the world, with all its unfairness, injustice and disappointments, not wallow in a fantasy version of what you think it *should* be? Maybe the precious darlings are suffering from a child-like delusion that all their problems can somehow be spirited away forever and ever. Bad news I'm afraid — life is not Narnia! Neither is university, and nor should it be.

Free speech? There are too many examples in history of people not exercising their right to speak up, despite being able to do so without fear of reprisal.

I first read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* when I was in my mid-twenties. It was a devastating indictment of the Soviet system and the forced labour camps it created. It was not that long ago the Soviet thought police arrested with impunity, imprisoned, tortured and executed millions of ordinary Russians, most of whom had done nothing wrong. Those punished included poets, musicians, artists, teachers and scientists, in fact anyone who uttered even the slightest criticism of the state, or who told the wrong sort of joke, or was discovered to harbour the wrong sort of opinions.

Children were encouraged to denounce their parents and teachers — the slightest suspect or ambiguous remark would result in immediate loss of employment, public debasement, peremptory trial and Draconian punishment.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, the young, fired with revolutionary fervour were also encouraged to denounce the old, leading to mass arrests, public humiliations,

imprisonments and the forced political 're-education' of countless millions of a whole generation.

In the West, we were safe in the knowledge that sort of thing could never happen in a free society. And yet, a mere 30 years after the Wall came down, thought and speech is now more free in Russia than it is in the West. The virus of totalitarianism, once safely confined to the East somehow mutated and escaped to flourish in the West.

Society, especially the young, is becoming ever more obsessed with the minutiae of political correctness. Again, it is youth and inexperience acting as its host.

One victim of the new fanaticism is Nobel prize-winning scientist Professor Sir Tim Hunt, shamefully driven from his position at University College London. His crime was making a silly joke about women scientists at a conference. Sir Tim found himself caught up in a frenzy of persecution that resulted in the loss of his job — a wholly disproportionate punishment for such a minor slip.

Likewise, Kevin Roberts, executive chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi, has recently been forced to resign for having the temerity to suggest that not all women want to get to the top because *some* women might hold children and family more important than a career in advertising.

It doesn't matter if you disagree with someone else's opinions and beliefs, but it does matter that they run the risk of being severely punished for expressing them. Destroying the careers of people once so respected, and with it the loss of reputation and income is a national disgrace.

We are living in a very dangerous time, one in which we are forced by fear of consequence to self-censorship, where one careless or misused word can ruin your life.

The PC Stasi are already at work implementing compliance, enforcing silence, promising public humiliation and indulging excessive punishment with fervour of Bolshevik proportions.

The Gulag is only a short step away.