

Cowardly elites appease bullies of cancel culture

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You know you're living in George Orwell's world when speech is considered violence and actual violence is considered speech. And when people who have no personal responsibility for things apologise while those who are personally responsible for looting, arson and great violence do not, and are not expected to either. If you say "all lives matter", and you happen to be an NBA commentator in California, you're fired. Not debated. Not called "insensitive". You lose your job for daring to differ from the social media orthodoxy. Likewise, suggest that "buildings matter, too" and if you're the top editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer you're gone. Forced to resign.

And heaven forbid if you're The New York Times editor who opts to run an opinion piece by a US senator — a Republican to be clear, though readers will have guessed that on their own. Publish Arkansas's Tom Cotton's piece on the need to stop the riots by sending in the troops, and you're gone. This despite The New York Times running endless pieces on the other side of the argument and the fact Cotton's view would have been endorsed by John F. Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan — just about everyone until a few seconds ago. Nope, the editor has to go for having the temerity to let any viewpoint be put forward that fails to genuflect at the feet of today's social media doctrines.

It is becoming plain that the cancel culture knows no limits. The old, incredibly valuable pieties at the heart of liberalism are going, going, gone. When I was at university in Canada in the 1980s we learned to argue against views with which we disagreed. We learned that we lived in a world where nice, smart, reasonable people just happened to disagree about quite a lot of things. And so, rather than be cocooned in some safe space in an attempt not to be offended, we learned to reflect on the competing view and then try to argue why we were right and they were wrong. Sometimes the other lot even convinced us — though that takes time. (If anyone says to you, "I've just heard your arguments and I've changed my entire world view on the basis of your insights; you've totally convinced me", then it's a sure thing that person wants to date you. Call that Allan's Law. Your views can change, but it takes time.)

Today, though, the Twitter mobs and others don't argue against my or your view that they dislike. Instead they argue against that view being able to exist at all. They aim to get you fired. Aim to get commercial sponsors to abandon advertising on your show. Aim to have you taken off Twitter. They want to cancel you because they think your views are offensive. Or wrongheaded. Or disrespectful. They don't want to live in a world where they have to hear things with which they disagree.

You then get the unedifying sight of people who, deep down, don't believe they said anything wrong being forced (because they want to keep their job, or their lousy friends, or an end the bile aimed at them) to apologise. Alas, grovelling and apologising and "taking the knee" for what you believe to have been true is a bad idea, just as apologising for things wholly out of your control, like your skin colour, is a bad idea. Or saying sorry because someone makes an undefined claim to your having been privileged solely because of your group — bad idea to

apologise for that too. Apologies are simply taken as a sign of weakness. You won't get absolution. American legal scholar Cass Sunstein published a paper last year based on extensive interviews with all sorts of people that backed this up. Apologies don't work in this context. They spur the mob on to demand more.

Here's a longstanding truth I learned way back when I was at a pretty tough state school: unless you stand up to bullies they will keep making you cede more. When you believe you are right, then never, ever back down. It doesn't matter if you'll be called names — “racist” is the mot du jour — it doesn't matter if you'll be threatened.

Unfortunately, in the US, Canada, Britain and here we see far too many contemptibly weak cowards in the upper levels of society, people prepared to apologise and appease at the drop of a hat in the hope the problem will go away. It won't. That great anti-appeaser Winston Churchill — ironically being condemned today by know-nothing protesters in Britain who've been defacing his statue on the grounds he was fascist when in fact he was history's greatest anti-fascist — once said that appeasement is like feeding a crocodile in the hope it eats you last.

We in the West live in countries doing better than anywhere on almost all human rights fronts. I've lived in Asia, spent big chunks of time in Africa, visited the Middle East. You give me the thing that matters to you (maybe treatment of women or minorities or race) and I will debate anyone that outcomes are better here. There are failings here. But you'd think our education system might put those failings into context. Alas, it doesn't. And I include our universities in that category.

When rampaging protesters treat symbols of our past no better than the Taliban did in Afghanistan, and when for a good few intents and purposes they shut down free speech, that hits at the heart of liberal democracy. Yes, far too many of our politicians have long thought free speech and its protection a third-order issue, that it didn't put food on the table. But without it there may not be a table left to put anything on.

We are witnessing the cowardice of liberal democracies' elites. They need to take on the cancel culture head on. And fight to win.

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