



You Can Laugh – But No One Who Matters is Laughing

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On the evening of 19 February 2016, Mark Steyn gave a lively and inspired speech for more than 450 IPA members at the 2016 IPA Gala Dinner at the Park Hyatt in Melbourne. He spoke in favour of free speech; of the hindrance 18C holds on that right; and why the most important measure of freedom in our society is upheld by the simple ability to laugh at a joke. This is an extract of that speech.

Before one speaks to an audience such as yourselves, a prudent man goes to the library and looks up '10 can't miss tips for public speakers', and right up at the front they advise you to open with a light-hearted observation, so people know it's not going to be a lot of heavy stuff. And that's what Professor Sir Tim Hunt, fellow of the Royal Society did last year. He's a Nobel Laureate ... He won the Nobel in 2001 and the Royal Society's Royal Medal for his discoveries on cell-cycle control—he's a brilliant man. And last year Sir Tim was in Seoul, South Korea for a science conference, and he was required to make a few remarks so he began with an ill-advised attempt at warming up the room:



Let me tell you about my trouble with girls; three things happen when they are in the lab, you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them they cry.

Not the funniest joke in the world. That's why you should hire a professional and not try it yourself.

Sir Tim did not anticipate that a throwaway line about how girls are so emotional about these things would result in the girls getting so emotional about these things.

While he was on the flight back to London his life was destroyed—over, he lost everything. His Professorship, his Royal Society Committee ships—all of it, gone, because of 12 seconds in a glorious half century of scientific brilliance.

There's a section in one of my books called 'Last Laughs' in which I write about a novel called *The Joke*, Milan Kundera's great tale of the pitfalls of ideologically unsound gags in communist Eastern Europe, in which a man makes a very mild throwaway joke and his entire life is ruined. And that's how we in the free world used to think about the communist world—they were the guys who policed jokes.

At the time of Stalin's death in 1953, there were over 200,000 prisoners in Soviet labour camps who had been convicted of telling jokes of which the regime did not approve. And we laugh because we're free and they're not.

But in fact the world of Milan Kundera's, in which a guy's life is destroyed for the wrong joke, is alive and well in the supposed free West. We don't send you to labour camps for the joke—not yet—but we are willing to destroy your life completely for a nonideologically compliant gag, as has happened to Sir Tim Hunt and others.

There's something ugly and tyrannous in the air. And I don't use that term lightly.

Tyranny is always capricious, and you can fall afoul of it no matter how hard you try to keep up.

A joke is the smallest indicator and most reliable indicator of liberty, so laugh it up while you can because there will be no jokes in the future, none, it will be a wasteland of plonking earnestness.

During the final stages of Nelson Mandela's slowly deteriorating health, Neil Phillips, who runs the 'Crumbs' sandwich shop in the English town of Rugeley, went online and tweeted:

'My PC takes so long to shut down I've decided to call it Nelson Mandela'.

The Staffordshire constabulary arrested him, seized his computers, and in the course of an eight hour detention finger-printed and DNA swabbed him. Eight hours in a jail cell for a joke. Not in communist Czechoslovakia, but in England.

You can laugh, but no one who matters is laughing.

We now live in an age of state ideology. There's a correct position on certain subjects and it's an

ever-growing risk—same-sex marriage, climate change, transgender rights, Muslim immigration. Millions and millions of people across the western world now think it perfectly normal that free speech does not extend to these areas, that on these subjects there's only the approved party line and dissenting views—not only can't be heard in public, but should not even be expressed in private. And if you're found to have expressed them, it's entirely reasonable that you should lose your job and if necessary your liberty.

A joke is a small thing, but a large profound loss and we're living in the dawn of a new age—the End of Argument. People no longer want to win the debate; they want to prevent the debate. That's true for Islam, and it's true for climate change.

So the science is settled, the theology is settled and if you disagree you need to be—as *The Guardian* recommends for climate deniers—'silenced'. And if you can't talk about something honestly, eventually you lose even the language with which to express a thought about it.

The most famous Australian primary schoolboy on the planet is the 7-year-old boy who starred in a tweet from Syria that went viral and neatly summed up the dead-end of diversity, as *The Australian* reported it:

Khaled Sharrouf's son, a child raised in the suburbs of Sydney, struggles with both arms to hold up the decapitated head of a slain Syrian soldier.

A 7-year-old boy; Australian born and bred, but he's proudly holding up the latest severed head in his dad's collection. Mr Sharrouf was supposed to have been droned last year, but apparently he's been calling pals in Australia from Syria in recent weeks, to complain about the government seizing his house in Sydney.

Mr Shorten cautioned against attaching any particular significance to that photograph:

I would be careful about using that shocking image, that shocking evil image, and trying to use it for purposes which it shouldn't be used for.

This is an extraordinary image of Australia to present to the world in the year 2015.

A 7-year-old boy raised in the Sydney suburbs, holding up this head. And the Leader of the Opposition's first reaction is to say 'don't talk about it'; 'be careful what you say about it', because the government backed off repealing section 18C. He's warning you that if you know what's best for you, you'll think twice before suggesting that 7-year-old Australian citizens waving around severed heads might be indicative of any broader issues.

Almost every real issue facing us today is hedged in by these considerations.

We drift about on the flotsam and jetsam of subjects. We never address the real subjects because we're constrained, by Bill Shorten and the rest of the political class telling us to be very careful about the bounds between which we hold these conversations.



These are the habits of liberty, and many people seem happy to surrender liberty so long as it's incremental and at least initially painless. And there's very little pretence that we're operating from first principles here.

The same people that say race is a social construct demand Aboriginal only computer labs; the same people that say you can't change your sexual orientation say you can change your gender; the same people that say that mocking Christianity is the sign of a healthy, transgressive culture say mocking Islam is grossly culturally insensitive. It's not about a coherent world view it's about power—it's about naked power. It's not about expanding rights; it's about something much cruder.

The failure of Mr Abbott's ministry on section 18C reminds us of an important truth of Milton Friedman's. Milton used to say:

Don't wait to elect the right politician to do the right thing, create the conditions whereby the wrong politicians are forced to do the right thing.

And that's what happened to me when I ran afoul of Canada's Human Rights Commission a few years ago. My predicament was apparently discussed in Cabinet, and Cabinet all agreed that I was certain to lose because Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act had a 100 per cent conviction rate.

But we pushed back against those Human Rights Commissions and we gave them the worst two years publicity in their history and by the end of it, section 13 got repealed.

So there are happy endings out there; they're hard fought.

Freedom requires eternal vigilance and is always there to be fought for. And I learned a big lesson in my fight against section 13, that if you push back as hard as the left pushes for its causes—your cause can be won.

Vow not to surrender the habits of liberty; to speak freely, to act freely, to live freely. They cannot prosecute us all.

When you can speak up, when you speak freely, you are free to persuade, you are free to find allies—and that is what I learned in my battle with Canada and that is what I commend to those trying to drive a stake through 18C.

Live your life in freedom and in liberty and no stupid act of some transient government can ever take them away from you.