



Liberals Must Learn From Breitbart

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Last week when he announced changes to the laws on Australian citizenship and foreign workers, Malcolm Turnbull spoke passionately about “Australian values” and the need to respect our culture and history.

It was a long overdue foray from him into the debate about our changing national identity. Unfortunately many on the political left demean that debate by labelling it as merely a manifestation of the so-called “culture wars” and as a debate not worth having. But as the left knows perfectly well, culture is everything.

On Anzac Day the Prime Minister’s rhetoric about Australian values confronted reality when ABC presenter Yassmin Abdel-Magied posted inappropriate and offensive comments on Facebook about the day of commemoration.

Turnbull is now facing increasingly strident calls from Coalition MPs for Abdel-Magied to be sacked from her federal government posts. And MPs are asking the not entirely unreasonable



question why the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded her international tour to promote a book she'd written.

Make no mistake. Abdel-Magied should be absolutely free to say what she said, no matter how hurtful or offensive. No one is suggesting she be the subject of an 18-month secret investigation by the Human Rights Commission, as Alex Wood was when in 2013 as a student at the Queensland University of Technology he wrote on Facebook "Just got kicked out of the unsigned Indigenous computer room. QUT stopping segregation with segregation".

But the question of whether what Abdel-Magied did should be unlawful is entirely different from whether it is appropriate for her to hold official government positions and be an ABC presenter.

What the government does about Abdel-Magied remains to be seen. If the ABC could name among its senior ranks of journalists and commentators a single conservative who admitted to voting for Tony Abbott and to liking Donald Trump, then perhaps Abdel-Magied's position at the national broadcaster would be slightly more tenable.

The person who understood this better than anyone in recent times was Andrew Breitbart, who is renowned for saying "politics is downstream from culture".

Breitbart was one of the co-founders of *The Huffington Post*, and in 2007 he started the Breitbart News Network. Steve Bannon was one of the company's original board members and took over when Breitbart died suddenly in 2012 at the age of 42.

The year before his death Breitbart published his book *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World*.

Breitbart was quite explicit about the purpose of his network. He had the aim of starting a site "unapologetically profreedom and pro-Israel".

Breitbart had an uncanny understanding of the intersection between culture, the media, and politics.

In an interview on Fox News in April 2011, he talked about Donald Trump. At the time Trump was considering running for the Republican nomination for the 2012 presidential election.

"Is Donald Trump a conservative?" Breitbart was asked.

"Of course he is not a conservative," Breitbart answered. "He was for Nancy Pelosi before he was against Nancy Pelosi. But this is a message to those candidates who are languishing at 2 per cent and 3 per cent within the Republican Party who are brand names in Washington, but the rest of the country don't know... celebrity is everything in this country. And if these guys don't learn how to play the media the way that Barack Obama played the media last election cycle and the way that Donald Trump is playing the election cycle, we're going to probably get a celebrity candidate."

Breitbart's timing was only four years out. A few days after that interview Trump announced he



would not join the 2012 presidential race. A public opinion poll at the time showed 71 per cent of those surveyed believed Trump had no chance of becoming president.

If the Coalition wants to win the culture wars it is going to have to start to fight them. A country's public culture is not only about culture per se. The fact the Coalition can't pass its cuts to government spending through the Senate is entirely a product of Australia's public culture.

It might be that Malcolm Turnbull has realised the truth of Breitbart's dictum.

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