



# Andrew Bolt and Freedom of Speech

Institute of Public Affairs  
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 **Institute of  
Public Affairs**  
*Free people, free society*

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**Paul Howes, AWU National Secretary, gave this speech at the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne as part of a panel discussion on Freedom of Speech in Australia and the controversial Melbourne columnist Andrew Bolt.**

In most public libraries you can get to read the most controversial things... and no one bats an eyelid. In fact you don't even have to visit a library to access the most evil of tracts, such as Mein Kampf or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – just jump on to Google and you'll be able to download the entire texts.

You can wander into many bookshops to get some weirdo ideas from the Moonies, to the Mormons, or the early novels of L. Ron Hubbard. Or listen to preachers of hate like the Reverend Fred Nile who tells us that homosexuals will burn a billion years in hell.

Or take in the words of Danny Nalliah of the Catch the Fire Ministries and his ravings and ranting about Muslims and Atheists.

So you can say a lot of things in our democracy, and you can watch a lot of things – violence, pornography, cattle being clumsily slaughtered, and you can read .... Well almost anything.

Increasingly it seem the 'well almost anything' may involve two names – 'Andrew' and 'Bolt'.

Now as you might suspect I actually disagree with many, if not most, things Andrew Bolt says ... and writes.

But I am concerned that people in some of the circles I mix, on my side of politics, increasingly seem to think that they should write, or invoke, or resurrect, laws that will shut Andrew Bolt up.

A democracy is – at the very least – a free marketplace of ideas, and a free marketplace of arguments against those ideas. But it is never, never, a stifling or a suffocation of ideas.

Ideas will out, they cannot be contained. They are our better, or our worse, angels – and they will be heard. Now I do vehemently disagree with what Andrew says, and often says, about certain people being insufficiently black.

There really is a silly idea here, of how black or white applicants should be for certain prizes and scholarships.

Andrew grabs an idea and often follows his logic to wherever it may lead him – God help those who stand in his way!

Now while I really can't accept some of this stuff I will – unsurprisingly – defend to the death his right to run a hot-headed, half-cocked argument.... where he says he is now putting into his cross-hairs all sorts of political, academic and media grandees.

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It is the Voltaire in me that says I don't like what you're saying – or about to say – but sure as hell I reckon you have the right, in our democracy, to run that argument.

Sometimes I hear about Andrew Bolt's latest outrageous challenge to orthodoxy, and groan, and wonder if he truly believes the words he has written. Or whether he merely loves the controversy and the headlines it creates.

But despite all the bombs he regularly throws over the parapet at some of my mates in Canberra I have to own up to liking Andrew Bolt. I have done media battle with him plenty of times and I know that there is a real decency there, which I would be proud to attest to in any court.

So I am sorry to see him now dragged through the courts for possibly breaching – if he did – a law that, probably, should not be there; stretching out its fingers into the realm of what Orwell might have called a Thought Crime; because he impertinently asked the wrong questions, when all the right answers have been handed down from above – in tablets of stone – long ago.

This is not a cast of mine that I applaud.

It smacks of the 16th century when Tyndale was strangled to death while tied at a stake and then his body burned, all for translating the Bible into English.

Or the 17th century when Galileo was put in danger of the same fate for saying the Earth moved around The Sun.

And the 20th century when books were burned in the public square for being not quite the way a dictator preferred a book to be.

In each case a Thought Crime is said to have been Committed, it comes from an elite, keen to assert its casting vote on what was reality, and who should decide what ideas were allowed, and in what circumstances they can be promoted.

So we need to be very, very careful when we define vilification and what, by contrast, dissent is or what can or cannot be accepted as a contrarian view.

I sometimes feel we are getting a bit too vigilant over words and ideas when many really vile deeds go unpunished.

I suspect I will always disagree with Andrew. On most things.

I will always fear his persuasive powers as an advocate of ideas that I will never agree with; But I will always be ready to meet him in vigorous debate over things that shape our country's future.

And I will always defend his democratic right, as a member of a free society, to say what he will, to exercise that privilege of dissent which has defined, since Federation, the Australia

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we all belong to, and all, with varying shades of caveat, believe in, and remain proud of, a free Australia.

Our freedom of speech should remain unmitigated by this new quavering cowardice that some would impose.

I thank you.