

From the Editor

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PUBLIC debate in Australia is very notably marked by the *ad hominem* style—playing the man, not the ball. Particularly among commentators of ‘progressive’ opinions, there is a strong tendency to state or imply personal unworthiness in those having differing opinions from those held by the commentator, to imply that holding certain opinions degrades the holder of those opinions.

This is hardly a necessary part of public debate. One can disagree with someone about an issue—even think that their ideas or policies are stupid or profoundly mistaken—without it following that you think they lack intellectual integrity or are morally deficient human beings.

Indeed, since the quality of an opinion and the quality of a character are completely independent, even if you proved to any reasonable person’s satisfaction that someone was a creep without any sense of personal honour, that would imply nothing at all about their opinions on any issue under the sun—unless, of course, their behaviour tells you something about whether they believe what they say. Even dishonourable creeps can be completely correct about issues of public life.

So, such a style only makes sense if one somehow believes that the quality of a person *does* determine the quality of their opinions. If you believe that proving X is a creep does indeed show that X’s opinion on Y is wrong. Which, if you think about it, is a very strange thing to believe.

But, suppose you do believe such a thing, what does it imply? That opinions maketh the person. So a person with good opinions is a good person. So, displaying good opinions is ‘proof’ that you are a good person.

Suddenly, all is revealed.

In a society where most people don’t really have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, one can worry about other things. In their



informative book *Myths of Rich & Poor: Why We’re Better Off Than We Think*, W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm point out that consumption patterns are moving up the ‘Maslow’ motivation chain as we become more prosperous—from physiological needs, through safety and social needs, to self-esteem and self-actualization. A typical American at the turn of the century spent \$76 out of every \$100 on food, clothing and shelter. By end of this century, that had fallen to \$37 out of every \$100.

Hence the success of ‘New Age’ shops and spirituality. Buy your self-actualization here!

Hence also the success of *moral display*: displaying your high moral status by ostentatiously espousing approved opinions which mark you off as a member of the ‘moral vanguard’.

In a world with fluid social hierarchies—such as those of wealth and fame—status is much more up for grabs by the entrepreneurially minded. Ostentatious display of a high moral tone and high moral purpose is certainly one path to status. And a very easy one at that—one merely has to exhibit, in an articulate way, the right *attitudes*. There is no requirement for further action, donation of funds or even particular inquiry into the actual effects of anything you might advocate.

Indeed, such inquiry would be positively discouraged.

If certain ‘marker opinions’ show one’s status as a good person, to accept

debate about such opinions undermines their ability to provide status, because it raises doubt as to their actual worthiness. And, of course, raising problems about such opinions shows that one is not appropriately marked as a ‘good person’.

So, you act to preserve the value of your ‘asset’ and to punish transgressors. One is therefore driven immediately to personal abuse and attacks on integrity as an argument style. Hence, the greater the moral vanity, the greater the bitchiness and personal nastiness to opponents. Thus the self-identified progressives’ fervent tendency to attempt to ‘prove’ opponents are racist, to label them as ultra-conservative or traitors to their community or in any other way to mark them off as people of no account—anything to avoid serious debate about the actual issues.

This is, of course, an attitude deeply inimical to reasoned debate and the functioning of democracy—what Clement Attlee called ‘government by discussion’. It is the point which neither the more simple-minded critics of political correctness nor the people whose position might be characterized as anti-anti-PC quite grasp.

It is perfectly true that, outside the academy, there has been no explicit censorship of politically incorrect opinions—though it is worth noting that someone whose opinions are well-represented in public debate may not be aware of the extent to which contrary opinions are filtered out by various ‘gatekeepers’ (see Dr Oakley’s piece in this issue of the *Review*). There has, however, been a concerted attempt to delegitimize certain types of opinion and to avoid debating issues on their merits—a problem particularly rife for issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, indigenous issues and the environment.

This is the harm that PC and moral vanity have done to public debate in Australia.

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