

## THE LEFT AND IDENTITY POLITICS

or

## THE RISE OF THE REACTIONARY LEFT

Let me begin today's talk by posing the following question:

*What does it mean, these days, when someone describes their politics as left-wing or progressive?*

This is a matter of growing interest and concern to me. As most of you here today would be aware, I was affiliated with the Left faction of the Australian Labor Party over a long political career that included fifteen years as a member of federal parliament. Yet I now find much of what is thought to be constitutive of left-wing politics to be perverse, indeed detestable.

The meaning of these terms has always been contested, of course. Different factions and tendencies of the Left understand them differently, and their meaning has tended to change over time. However until recently all parts of the Left would happily trace their lineage back to the radical wing of the Enlightenment, the "revolution of the mind" that transformed European and North American civilization in the 17th and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

That has changed in recent decades in ways that I find profoundly disturbing. The "Enlightenment project", as they now like to call it, is typically disparaged by intellectuals of a progressive bent. The notion of human universality is deprecated, the value of reasoned debate questioned as argument is seen as just a mask for the exercise of power, the quest for objective truth replaced by narratives and stories, and the right to strongly critique religious belief systems abrogated, albeit selectively.

This perplexed the late Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm who in a 1996 lecture said:

*"So what does identity politics have to do with the Left? Let me state firmly what should not need restating. The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings."*

Things have reached a stage where, in my view not only are traditional Leftist values being turned on their head, but foundational features of

liberal civilization are being systematically deprecated and compromised throughout the Western world. This is an extraordinarily serious development. In my view any morally and intellectually defensible effort to promote legitimate Left wing goals such as addressing growing inequality should aim to build on this civilizational foundation rather than tear it down.

The culprit, I will argue, is the ideology of identity politics that, when combined with the pernicious system of thought control we nowadays call political correctness, has had a deadening effect on public debate of some of the most important issues we face.

In the UK leftists who deplore these developments such as the veteran LGBT campaigner Peter Tatchell have coined the term “regressive Left” to describe the mind set I will be talking about. My only quibble with this expression is that I think it understates the problem. I prefer to call identity politics and political correctness reactionary in the old strongly pejorative sense that we on the Left used to understand that term.

As usual, “progressive” academia is playing a pernicious role. A decade ago the American political scientist Richard Wolin wrote a book that traces the intellectual genealogy of this transformation. He writes:

*“... one of the peculiarities of our times is that Counter-Enlightenment arguments once the exclusive prerogative of the political Right have attained a new lease on life among representatives of the cultural Left...*

*... As a prominent advocate of postmodern political theory contends, one need only outfit the Counter-Enlightenment standpoint with a new ‘articulation’ to make it serviceable for the ends of the postmodern Left.”*

This would be bad enough if confined to the academic realm. However things get really serious when this mindset starts to shape the wider society, as it inevitably does as graduates who have had their worldview shaped by it flow into the media, government, politics and business – what the 1960s German student activist Rudi Dutschke called the “long march through the institutions”.

In what follows I will be particularly concerned with what identity politics does when it starts to influence public policy – identity politics in action. The effects are almost always severely detrimental to the highly disadvantaged people whose cause it claims to champion.

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To see what I am getting at, let us first travel back in time more than half a century to Martin Luther King's great civil rights speech of 1963 in which he looked forward to a day when his children would "not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character".

At the time this sentiment was embraced wholeheartedly by Left and progressive opinion, and inspired people across the ideological spectrum. These words were widely seen as the moral apogee of the civil rights movement, a view which I still maintain.

Race was a matter that the Left used to get roughly right, in my opinion. Racial differences were seen as surface manifestations of very minor genetic variations that should be treated as inconsequential, something people were enjoined to look through. This was not to deny the continuing reality of racism, but expressed an aspiration to transcend it.

Fast forward to present day academia and we find a completely different attitude. Nowadays someone expressing King's sentiments could be in serious trouble, maybe even lose his or her job. At the behest of its President Janet Napolitano, the former Secretary for Homeland Security in the Obama administration, the University of California recently held a series of training sessions throughout its vast system at which faculty leaders were provided with a list of phrases that were deemed "microaggressions", instances of supposed subconscious racism, that they were instructed to avoid. The *verboten* expressions include:

- When I look at you, I don't see colour
- There is only one race, the human race
- I don't believe in race

Just think of that. In one of America's major university systems, faculty leaders are instructed to avoid expressions that affirm human universality. Not even allowed to say them, let alone to debate whether such statements are right. I find that absolutely extraordinary, and lamentable. I wonder what Martin Luther King would say about that, if he could be brought back to life. Or more to the point, what those responsible would say to him.

They might say that King's sentiments were OK in their time, but that things have moved on. In these more enlightened times, the offending

expressions are deemed objectionable because they, and I am quoting from the document, deny “the experiences of students by questioning the credibility/validity of their stories”.

They do nothing of the sort. On any sane reading they reflect a disposition to treat people according to their merits, rather than their skin colour. The authors of this ridiculous document presume that people “of colour” will invariably prefer to be regarded, or “recognized” in the preferred parlance, according to their putative victim status rather than being treated as a normal colleague in the workplace, or wherever. I find this counter-intuitive and frankly arrogant.

The old Left hoped to transcend race, to move it into the background, where it belongs. Contemporary progressives want to do the opposite, to perpetuate race consciousness, to keep alive racial grievances. They apparently think this is a great advance. I think it is a dreadful regression.

This kind of thinking is one manifestation of identity politics, the ideology that I identified at the start as the main source of the pathologies that concern me. So what is this thing?

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, which aims to provide definitive articles on the main areas of philosophical inquiry, contains a long article written by a sympathetic philosopher that contains the following paragraph:

*“What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.”*

So whenever we meet with someone, we are to think of that person as, first and foremost, a member of some identity category, or perhaps some combination of categories, and secondarily as a human being.

I don’t know about you, but I find this obnoxious.

What does this “recognition” amount to, if not seeing people as representative of some class of persons, with an expected set of attributes and attitudes. This is generally rationalized in terms of common

experiences of oppression arising from racism, sexism, and so on. What this overlooks is that human beings, possessing agency, can respond to a common set of experiences in quite different and in some cases diametrically opposed, ways. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali feminist and freethinker reacted to her oppressive upbringing, including experiencing genital mutilation, by rejecting Islam and championing liberal Western culture. Others might respond by embracing jihadist terrorism.

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As Hirsi Ali was to discover, woe betide anyone who fails to know their place and stick to the script, the approved narrative for their particular oppressed category. The truth or otherwise of these narratives seems to be of little importance, if not completely irrelevant. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy article I quoted earlier goes on to say:

*"For many proponents of identity politics this demand for authenticity includes appeals to a time before oppression, or a culture or way of life damaged by colonialism, imperialism, or even genocide"*

She goes on to cite approvingly another identity theorist who says:

*"Indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream. Western notions of domination (human and natural) are noticeably absent; in their place we find harmony, autonomy, and respect. We have a responsibility to recover, understand, and preserve these values, not only because they represent a unique contribution to the history of ideas, but because renewal of respect for traditional values is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social problems that beset our people."*

Really? So notions of domination were unknown in indigenous cultures before Westerners appeared on the scene? In a more rational world, we might expect such a claim to be supported by evidence based on a close study of the cultures under consideration. Notice that what we have here is both an unsupported empirical claim, and a policy prescription that says the key to solving indigenous disadvantage is to get back to traditional values, to reassert the old identity.

The kind of tragic result that can eventuate when this thinking starts to shape government policy is exemplified by the effect of the change in

policy toward indigenous people in Australia that began around 40 years ago under the influence of the late H.C. "Nugget" Coombes, a former head of the Reserve Bank who came to exert great influence on aboriginal policy.

As a result of this, the emphasis shifted from integrating Aborigines into mainstream Australia to policies that aimed to perpetuate traditional lifestyles and devolved many areas of policy delivery to autonomous bodies like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the various land councils.

I can say these approach was pursued with an immense amount of goodwill. The situation indigenous people find themselves in today is a devastating indictment of modern Australia, our greatest moral failing as a nation. While I was part of the government, both as a backbencher and a minister, there was a ready willingness to put very substantial resources into addressing the problem.

In addition to funding for mainstream programs from which aborigines benefit, there was a plethora of initiatives to do with aboriginal health, incarceration, housing, and so on amounting to billions of dollars, and it has continued. The National Commission for Audit estimates that in 2010-11 the Commonwealth spent \$8.3 billion on mainstream programs, \$3.2 billion on indigenous specific programs, and state and territory governments put in a further \$14 billion.

The results to date from this have been paltry, to say the least. Could it be that the premise underlying policy, that restoring and respecting traditional values was the key to success, was mistaken?

This is certainly the view of Peter Sutton, an anthropologist and linguist who spent thirty years working closely with indigenous communities. He was the principle researcher backing the Wik native title claim.

In 2009 he produced a devastating book, *The Politics of Suffering*, describing what he has observed. In the case of remote communities, not only has there not been progress, but conditions have deteriorated severely. Communities like Aurukun with which Sutton had a long-term connection, had gone from a "liveable and viable community" to a disaster zone of violent conflict, rape and child and elder abuse. Aboriginal leaders like Noel Pearson have made similar observations. The aboriginal academic Marcia Langton is scathing in her forward to the book:

*"... it is a powerful corrective to the romantic, misinformed fabrications about Aborigines as a special kind of modern noble savage"*

This is what happens when you substitute ideological preconceptions for evidence-based approaches. The claim that notions of dominance appeared only with European settlement is flatly contradicted by a wealth of eye-witness accounts from French and British settlers, as well as archaeological evidence.

So entrenched has the identity politics mentality become that it is very hard to challenge policy based on it even in the face of overwhelming evidence of failure, such is the fear of being tagged a "racist". Sutton's book was largely ignored – I only learned of it a couple of years ago.

So the policy approach persisted, to the very great detriment of Australia's indigenous people.

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Turning to the international sphere, the oppressed identity group *par excellence* is the Palestinians. Denouncing Israel for all manner of real and imagined misdeeds has become an obsession of the Left to the point of derangement.

On the university campuses, things have reached a point that unmolested advocacy of the Israeli position has become almost impossible. I experienced this directly a year ago when a lecture by the former commander of UK forces in Afghanistan, Richard Kemp, was disrupted by pro-Palestinian protestors who entered on mass chanting and shouting.

Kemp became a bogey for to the pro-Palestinians when during the Gaza conflict of 2014 when he publicly credited the Israeli forces with doing all that was practically feasible to minimize civilian casualties given that Hamas had deliberately located its rocket launch sites, command centres and arms dumps amongst densely populated residential areas.

The disruptors made no secret that they were trying to "no platform" Kemp, to stop him being heard. As one was quoted in saying in the student paper *Honi Soit* afterwards "we did not go there to debate the matter". This is typical of what goes on at universities throughout the Western world. The Palestinian cause is sacrosanct, the villainy of Israel is presumed. No need to hear both sides of the argument. Jewish students I met spoke of feeling increasingly intimidated, especially if they are known to be defenders of the Israeli position.

The disruptors were vocally supported by a number of academics present, one of whom, Nick Riemer a lecturer in English, defended the students in an article in *New Matilda* in these terms:

*"Many left-wing people, I believe, would defend the proposition that protesters have the right to disrupt any kind of public speaker, but that only disruptions of certain public speakers are right"*

Simply incredible. George Orwell must be turning in his grave.

However what struck me as most extraordinary at the time was the content of the speech made by the leader of the disruptors, a young woman screeching into a megaphone set to maximum volume. She shouted her outrage that the university had earlier prevented a talk by a spokesman for the extreme Islamist group Hibz ut-Tahrir. This group gained notoriety when its Australian leader refused on ABC *Lateline* to condemn ISIS tactics like mass beheadings, crucifixions and selling non-Muslim women into sexual slavery .

The top cleric of the group Ismail al-Wahwah in a reported rant in Sydney referred to Jews as "the most evil creature of Allah" who have "corrupted the world" and will "pay for blood with blood".

Just imagine that. A left-winger sticking up for a vehemently and unapologetically arch-reactionary and anti-Semitic religious group.

The moral and intellectual corruption of progressive academia is something to behold. Any identity group, or nationality, deemed to be "oppressed" must be supported, and negative features of those cultures, no matter how odious, must be overlooked or downplayed. Take the case of Judith Butler, an American professor who specializes in "queer theory", and a leading figure in the global BDS campaign against Israel.

This is how she responded to a question about Hamas and Hezbollah at Berkeley university:

*"Yes, understanding Hamas, Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left, is extremely important. That does not stop us from being critical of certain dimensions of both movements. It doesn't stop those of us who are interested in non-violent politics from raising the question of whether there are other options besides violence."*

Think about that for a moment. Both of these terrorist organisations have explicitly expressed genocidal intentions toward Jews, not just those in

Israel, but all Jews. In the case of Hamas, it is codified in their notorious Charter, adopted in 1988. This foul document looks forward in Article 7 to the day when every last Jew on earth can be killed. Similarly Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah welcomed the Jews gathering in Israel as it would save them from "having to go to the ends of the world" to hunt them down.

But according to the distinguished professor of Queer Theory, it is "extremely important" to see these groups as part of the global progressive Left. Upon being criticized, she pointed out her preference for non-violent politics, but continued to insist on their identification with the progressive Left.

I don't know about you, but if this is what being progressive and Left-wing amounts to these days, then I want nothing to do with it.

This is, as we know, the great age of political correctness, a time when liberal academics are writing articles entitled "Why I am terrified of my students". One wrong word, one misidentified gender category, could trigger a Twitterstorm, the modern equivalent of a witch hunt, directed at the offender.

In a sane world, Butler's outrageous comments would be academic death, bringing her credibility on any political issue to a definitive end. Far from it: she has gone on from strength to strength, even receiving the prestigious Theodore Adorno award for her efforts.

In case you think these attitudes are confined to academia take note that the left-wing leader of the British Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn has spoken warmly of his "friends" in Hamas and Hezbollah.

I will not address the Israel / Palestine issue today other than to note that any criticism of Israel that fails to take account of the nature of their adversaries does not deserve to be taken seriously, and that in my view the sort of rejectionism urged on the Palestinians by their BDS "allies" will only guarantee their continued immiseration. But that is a debate for another day.

I cannot resist making one further point. A couple of years ago an international survey showed Tel Aviv to be the world's favourite gay tourist destination. The identity theorists, facing the terrible prospect they might have to concede something good about Israel, came up with the theory of "pinkwashing". You see, this gay-friendly attitude was really just

a cunning ploy to divert attention away from Israel's oppression of the Palestinians.

Judith Butler was involved in organising a conference in New York on "Heteronormativity and Pinkwashing". Meanwhile in Tehran gays are publicly hanged from cranes in downtown Tehran. No academic conferences on that, as far as I know.

The emerging alliance between the left and Islamism strikes me as one of the strangest and most disconcerting developments in my lifetime. It is something I could never have imagined when I first became involved in left-wing politics in the early 1970s.

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I turn now to one of the most despicable aspects of the mind-set formed by identity politics. This is the treatment of those who come from cultures deemed oppressed, but who fail to stick to the prescribed narrative.

The most severe condemnation seems to fall on dissenters from Islamic cultures. This is a particular source of embarrassment to politically correct Leftists as such dissenters often fit all the criteria for oppressed status. There is clearly a hierarchy of correctnesses in which Islamic culture is given a special dispensation when it comes to women's rights, gay rights and so on, as people like Peter Tatchell are starting to note.

The best known case is that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali a black Somalian woman born into a Muslim family and a victim of female genital mutilation (FGM). She is a what Muslim's term an apostate: she fled to the Netherlands, rejected Islam, and became a vocal champion of Western liberal culture and openly embraced Enlightenment values.

For her troubles, she has been subjected to repeated "no platforming" attempts at universities, the most recent being a successful campaign to rescind an invitation for her to give a commencement address at Brandeis University in the United States. These efforts were supported by the full panoply of progressive opinion including, incredibly, secular humanist groups.

A particularly pernicious role was played *bien pensant* intellectuals, especially Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash, whose articles can be

seen regularly in the *New York Review of Books* and similar publications. The liberal Left American writer Paul Berman was inspired to write a book about this, contrasting Ali's treatment with the much more favourable treatment of the *faux* moderate Muslim Tariq Ramadan, whose idea of moderation was to support a moratorium on, rather than an end to, the stoning of women during a debate with French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

Less well known is the case of the Iranian born activist Maryam Namazie, a British resident. An avowed atheist, Namazie is spokesperson for the Council of British Ex-Muslims. Like Hirsi Ali, she has been subjected to "no platforming" attempts at British universities, the most recent late last year when she was invited to address the Atheist, Secular and Humanist Society at Goldsmiths University, part of the University of London. The local Islamic students society immediately objected, saying that:

*"We feel having her present, will be a violation to our safe space ... all she will do is incite hatred and bigotry, at a very sensitive time for Muslims in the light of a huge rise in Islamophobic attacks."*

Bear in mind that, but for her open rejection of Islam, Namazie would be a welcome presence on any progressive campus. She ticks all the right boxes – support for feminism, gay rights and other progressive causes. Her politics are actually far Left. She advocates something called "Workerist Communism".

Namazie was able to speak, but her meeting was disrupted in a most sinister way, with constant interruptions, unplugging of her power point presentation, and actual death threats against attendees one of whom, Reza Moradi said the person threatening him:

*"looked right into my eyes and with his finger, shaping hand like a handgun, touched his forehead"*

Here is the really bizarre twist. The Islamic Society's objection to Namazie being invited to speak was backed by both the Goldsmith's Feminist and LGBT societies. Here is what the feminists had to say:

*"Goldsmiths Feminist Society stands in solidarity with Goldsmiths Islamic Society. We support them in condemning the actions of the Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society and agree that hosting known Islamophobes at our university creates a climate of hatred."*

This support was offered after the appalling intimidation at the meeting became known. So much for “safe spaces”. It seems that in the minds of contemporary progressives the right to safety from offensive ideas ranks far higher than safety from actual death threats.

In January the Council of British Ex-Muslims issued a paper describing a number of case studies of attempted speech-suppression on British campuses. They concluded:

*“Whilst Islamic Societies have been able to invite their hate preachers without question, those promoting a progressive counter-narrative, like the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, have faced restrictions and attempts at censorship under the guise of promoting ‘safe spaces’ and opposing ‘Islamophobia’.”*

So this is the treatment meted out to outspoken ex-Muslims. What about genuinely moderate Muslims, like Maajid Nawaz, the founder of the Quilliam Foundation in the UK?

Maajid Nawaz is an interesting character. A British Muslim from a Pakistani background, he had an early infatuation with extremism, joining up with the radical Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahrir. This flirtation actually got him a five year spell in an Egyptian gaol, a pretty sobering experience I imagine, and he broke with extremism.

The Quilliam Foundation’s statement of purpose says:

*“Quilliam is the world’s first counter-extremism think tank set up to address the unique challenges of citizenship, identity, and belonging in a globalised world. Quilliam stands for religious freedom, equality, human rights and democracy.”*

For his trouble, Nawaz has been subjected to a series of vicious and dishonest hatchet jobs in impeccably liberal media like the *Guardian* newspaper and the website *Salon.com*. The thing that particularly infuriated them was Nawaz’s engaging in a dialogue with neuroscientist and high-profile atheist Sam Harris, which subsequently appeared in book form. He was called a “lapdog”, a “porch monkey” and “Muslim validator”.

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You see the message that progressive opinion in the West is giving to people like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Maryam Namazie and Maajid Nawaz, and anyone minded to emulate them. Who do you think you are, criticising and rejecting the tenets of Islam? Don't you realize that is part of your culture, of what you are, or at least ought to be? What makes you think you have the right criticize these things, to reject them to embrace the liberal culture of the West – and most shockingly, to identify with the values of the Enlightenment? Don't you know this is just a mask for Western colonial oppression?

Perhaps the most sinister term used in academia for people like Hirsi Ali, Maryam Namazie and Maajid is "native informant". With its implication of dark treachery, this is a particularly nasty epithet given that under Islam apostasy and blasphemy are crimes punishable by death.

This is the racism of the anti-racists, who think that people born into a particular identity group should stick to it, should be essentially defined by it rather than by their universal humanity and their status as individuals with rational agency able to assess the values of the cultural milieu into which they are born, and perhaps to reject them.

Progressive opinion has sought to medicalize criticism of or concern about Islam with the bogus concept of Islamophobia, which is routinely conflated with racism. Since when has it been racist to criticise a creed, a belief system with adherents of all races?

The Organisation of Islamic Conference, which represents all the main Muslim states has latched hold of this and for some years has waged an international campaign centred on the UN to subject all countries, including the West, to a de facto prohibition on blasphemy.

In this campaign they can rely on support from legions of progressive "useful idiots" in the West, like the former leader of the British Labour Party Ed Miliband who wanted to make Islamophobia, which he never bothered to define, an aggravated criminal offence. And did you know that British Labour is now holding gender segregated meetings in parts of England?

Another striking feature of the mindset shaped by identity politics is that there is a definite hierarchy of identities in which cultural identity is trumps. Whenever there is a clash between cultural identity and, say, the rights of women or gays, culture wins out.

Take the matter of female genital mutilation (FGM), an appalling practise with lifelong physical and psychological consequences for those subjected to it, but widely practised in parts of the developing world. In recent times it has spread with immigrant populations to the developed world, and in some cases has become endemic.

Where are the feminists on this? To be fair, a small number have taken up the issue, such as the feminist writer Meredith Tax. But then we have the feminist icon Germaine Greer who has repeatedly gone on the record, including on the ABC Q & A program, denouncing concern about FGM as a manifestation of Western cultural arrogance.

Attitudes like Greer's help explain the extraordinary lassitude of the British criminal justice system toward this issue. FGM has been a criminal offense in Britain since 1984, but to date there has not been a single conviction and only very recently any attempted prosecutions. This despite British hospitals reporting an average of fifteen cases per day.

In the name of "cultural respect", the interests of these girls are deprecated, their suffering rationalized or ignored. How racist of the "anti-racists", to say girls from this cultural background do not have the same right to be protected from severe physical mutilation as anyone else.

It is not just girls of colour who suffer from this kind of thinking. In 2012 *The Times* newspaper reported on a truly dreadful pattern of abuse of white girls, typically from severely dysfunctional families, in the northern English town of Rotherham. The scale of this abuse was extraordinary: between 1997 and 2013 some 1400 girls were abused.

The nature of the abuse was described in an official report by Professor Alexis Jay, a former chief social work adviser to the Scottish government. I quote from the report:

*"It is hard to describe the appalling nature of the abuse that child victims suffered. They were raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the north of England, abducted, beaten, and intimidated. There were examples of children who had been doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, threatened with guns, made to witness brutally violent rapes and threatened they would be next if they told anyone. Girls as young as 11 were raped by large numbers of male perpetrators."*

This went on for sixteen years, during which time all the government and community agencies that were supposed to protect these girls –

community services, the police, the borough council, local politicians – failed comprehensively.

This report, and a subsequent one commissioned by the British government, makes clear that the reluctance to act arose from a pervasive fear of being labelled racist, given that almost all the perpetrators were from a Pakistani Muslim background. According to Casey's report:

*"Frontline staff were clearly anxious about being branded racist. Whether there was an element of self-censorship or otherwise, the impact of this was clear. The Council was not dealing with a serious problem right before its eyes."*

Defenders of identity politics see it as emancipatory. I contend it is an oppressive ideology that limits the choices and harms people who fall into the categories it deems oppressed. It denies them agency and restricts their ability as individuals to make judgements and choices about their cultural affiliation. Those who challenge the norms of their assigned identity are at best condescended to, at worst severely vilified and in some cases physically endangered.

The identity politics mindset is an equal opportunity oppressor. To girls of colour who experience FGM it says: "Sorry, but this is an aspect of your culture, part of what you are. For us to make too much of an issue of it would show a lack of cultural respect. You will just have to put up with it, unfortunately".

To white girls from impoverished backgrounds subject to wholesale severe sexual abuse it seems to say: "Sorry, we can't intervene too actively to stop this since it might give succour to racists and Islamophobes. The irony is that the Rotherham cover up did exactly that, as far right groups exploited the issue while local Labour politicians sat on their hands".

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There is, however, one major exception to the view that all cultures are equally virtuous, and that is Western culture. I had not fully appreciated the sheer self-loathing depths of the politically correct mindset until I learned last year of a new field proliferating at American universities called Whiteness Studies. This is one branch of a broader field known as

Critical Race Theory. As usual, we find academic imitators around the world, including Australia, which now boasts a national Association of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies.

According to the critical race and whiteness studies brigade whiteness is vile, unlike all other identities which are to be celebrated. According to one leading figure "there is no crime that whiteness has not committed against people of colour". One of the pioneers, Noel Ignatieff, went so far as to call for the "abolition of whiteness". Just imagine if things like this were said about any other identity.

And whites are invariably privileged. According to Ignatiev:

*"The white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it."*

Got that? The girls from broken homes subjected to extremely violent sexual assault in Rotherham and South West Sydney are actually privileged by virtue of their white skin. As for Barrack Obama's daughters, and the billionaire Oprah Winfrey, they are oppressed.

The practitioners of these fields see themselves as much more than abstract theorists. Here is a quote from an article on the Harvard law faculty website:

*"Critical race scholars identify and embrace a radical tradition of race-conscious mobilization as an empowerment strategy for African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and other persons of colour"*

So you see we have gone from Martin Luther King to "race conscious mobilization". The main outlet for such mobilization, in America at least, is the so-called Black Lives Matter movement, the main practical effect of which has been to intimidate inner-city cops into backing away from the proactive policing policies that have underpinned the dramatic drop in crime rates, especially homicides, since the 1990s.

Those gains have been put into reverse, with a dramatic rate in homicides in most of the cities where BLM is most active, a rise that dwarfs the very small number of genuinely racially motivated police shootings. But so what – as usual, for those of this ideological bent, actual consequences for the oppressed minority hardly figure compared to maintaining the narrative.

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So here, in a nutshell, is my indictment of identity politics and political correctness.

I contend they are:

- Antithetical to free speech and unfettered debate, preferring to shut down opponents rather than engaging with or challenging them.
- Inclined to see people as creatures of their culture, rather than as humans with freewill who have the right to reject aspects of their culture, or to defect from it completely.
- Oblivious to or defensive of odious – in some cases genocidal – attitudes or behaviours if perpetrated by those who claim, like Hamas and Hezbollah, to represent an oppressed victim group.
- Cruelly indifferent to the real-world impact of nostrums derived from its theories on the disadvantaged groups it claims to champion.
- Obsessed with seeing everything through the prism of race, rather than aspiring to transcend it like earlier generations of civil rights activists.
- Racist, both in its denial of agency to members of designated oppressed cultures, and in its extreme derogation of “whiteness”, which it absurdly conflates with privilege.
- Reactionary, in fighting to protect ultra conservative and in some cases violent religious ideologies from scrutiny.

In other words, they are bad news - the diametric opposite of everything I thought the Left stood for when I first got involved in it.

The kind of liberal civilization that we in the West have come to take for granted now faces the greatest set of challenges since the mid-century high point of communist and fascist totalitarianism. Not least is the increasing encroachment of Islam into our societies, an issue that has become critical in Europe in recent days. The violent and supremacist aspects of this creed need to be faced up to honestly.

Now, more than ever, we need clear-headed assessments and analysis if appropriate responses are to be made. To use a medical metaphor, identity politics and political correctness are a mind virus, an auto-

immune disease preventing western nations from the kind of evaluation so essential for the preservation of their civilization.

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I will conclude by returning to the matter of free speech. Like the proverbial boiling frog, many people in Western societies have hardly noticed the gradual erosion of this most crucial of values in recent years. The “velvet totalitarians” of political correctness actually insist that restricting speech is virtuous, providing a cover rationale for universities, media organisations and others who succumb to the all too plausible fear of disruption and possibly serious violence.

We need constant reminders of what it is like to live in a genuinely free society. I recently read a biography by Susan Jacoby of the famous, some would say notorious, American freethinker Robert Ingersoll. A lawyer and veteran of the American Civil War, Ingersoll was arguably the best known orator of late nineteenth century America during an era when oratory was one of the main forms of public entertainment.

Ingersoll toured the length and breadth of the United States speaking against organised religion to sell-out audiences, subjecting Christian and other religious beliefs to critical scrutiny and ridicule. Here is Jacoby’s account of what it was like:

*"To influence the public in the late nineteenth century, one was required to speak and appear as oneself. And as contemporary newspaper accounts make clear, Ingersoll was a master at reaching people who did not necessarily agree with him or who might have been downright hostile.*

*When he appeared for the first time in medium-sized cities where orthodox religious influence was strong, Ingersoll’s reputation as a heretic often held down the size of the audience. That was never true the second time the Great Agnostic spoke. Once the local newspapers reported on the entertainment value of Ingersoll’s talks, tickets became a prize for scalpers.*

*In Iowa, the Mason City Republican reported that a majority of those attending an 1885 Ingersoll lecture were orthodox religious believers who nevertheless appreciated Ingersoll’s wit at the expense of their own faith. ‘Foreordination laughs jostled freewill smiles,’ the reporter recalled,*

*'Baptist cachinations floated out to join apostolic roars, and there was a grand unison of orthodox cheers for the most unorthodox jokes.'*

This is how devout Christian believers responded to someone challenging their most cherished beliefs, in a much more religious age, and in a society awash with guns. Imagine the fate of a critic of Islam trying to do the same today.

Actually we don't need to do much imagining in light of the string of assassinations, massacres and death threats of high-profile critics of Islam that have blighted Europe in recent times, not to mention the recent appallingly savage killings of secularists and followers of other religions in Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries.

But consider the case of Molly Norris, a Seattle cartoonist of liberal-progressive politics who in April 2010 launched an imaginary group called "Citizens Against Citizens Against Humor" and proposed an "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day". This was in response to an earlier cartoon controversy.

According to a friend cited by CNN "she didn't mean to skewer or offend. She just thought people should lighten up... She was just standing up for free speech. But in a very gentle way."

The result? She was subjected to death threats, including a call for her assassination by the Islamist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, threats that the FBI warned her were all too credible. She has abandoned her name, her job, her family, and has gone into hiding where she remains today.

Her former employer, the *Seattle Weekly News* published an article that said this:

*"You may have noticed that Molly Norris' comic is not in the paper this week. That's because there is no more Molly. The gifted artist is alive and well, thankfully. But on the insistence of top security specialists at the FBI, she is, as they put it, 'going ghost': moving, changing her name, and essentially wiping away her identity. She will no longer be publishing cartoons in our paper or in City Arts magazine, where she has been a regular contributor. She is, in effect, being put into a witness-protection program—except, as she notes, without the government picking up the tab."*

Hardly a tweet about this from the "progressive Left", needless to say. After all, that might be considered Islamophobic.

*Peter Baldwin 23 April 2016*