

Is Free Speech More Important Than Not Causing Offence?

"Everyone is in favour of free speech. Hardly a day passes without its being extolled, but some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone else says anything back, that is an outrage." (Winston Churchill)

As we become more and more 'woke', thanks in no small part to fearing we might trigger the 'snowflakes' of society and get 'cancelled', our rights and freedoms around speaking candidly feel like they are ever-diminishing by the day. Liz Scales reports.

English philosopher J.S. Mill once summed up the importance of free speech when he stated,

"The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

I think Mill summarises what most pragmatic, erudite individuals believe. Once-upon-a-time, in the not-too-distant past, dissidents could speak without fear and the law would protect them against any punishment concocted to punish or censor them. As an argument, the right to an opinion was viewed as sacrosanct and protesters were protected from those who wished to silence them. Public opinion was also largely on the side of the law - ready to discredit those people who assumed the right to censor their adversaries.

Not any more! Now if we state something that a section of people disagree with, or accidentally misgender someone, we're viewed as inciting hatred. Someone will be offended - Tweets will be written and your cancellation will be imminent. But why can't a person/group be vexed and either deal with it or offer a rebuke? Why, in 2021 is the answer to have people cancelled? Free speech it seems is no longer a human right that is valued.

Free speech is fundamental in a democracy but many so called liberals persistently attempt to silence dissenting voices; take Piers Morgan as an example - it wasn't enough for the woke mob to try to silence him, they also tried to 'cancel' him by de-platforming him and trying to have him fired. That's an incredibly dangerous mindset as we need to question opinions, we need to know if we're correct in our viewpoint, we need to be challenged if we're wrong, make adjustments and learn - that's how society evolves and we see progress as a civilisation - not



be censoring people. The only time speech should be censored is when inciting physical violence.

Some liberals want every argument shut down that causes offence. But what is offence? We're talking about something extremely subjective. I may not agree with something a politician says for example, but I can challenge it; I would not attempt to have that person removed from their job - that's a step too far. Having people sacked and removing their platform accomplishes nothing - it hinders engagement, discussion and contemplation. Look how far we've progressed with race, sexuality, minority rights and other issues in the world.

Did we get there by censoring voices?

Remember when the signs 'No Irish Need Apply' used to be in shop windows and on

job ads? Did people realise that was wrong until there was outrage and debate? Because of the discourse people learned it was wrong and now offensive and racist signs like this would not be acceptable.

If we disagree with someone and they happen to be of a different race, gender or ethnic group it doesn't mean we are racist or misogynist, we are entitled to our opinion and people can use their intelligence to evaluate the merits of that opinion. Cancelling a person as the woke generation would have us do is at best misguided and has the potential to leave us all vulnerable to those who wish to deny true discourse, the political situation in Hong Kong and Myanmar come to mind. If we do not have true freedom to speak without fear we will not continue to evolve and improve.

Have your say on Twitter @BigIssueIreland