

## HOW FREE SPEECH DIES

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Warning to Aussies from a visiting American: pay careful attention to the latest mob action to darken one of America's elite, and one of its loveliest, campuses, Middlebury College in Vermont. The incident offers a glimpse of how identity politics and political correctness can evolve into a dangerous religious orthodoxy with its own canonical dogma, rituals, believers, and heretics. Middlebury is a foretaste of where Australia is headed if the campus culture of intolerance continues on the same trajectory. First, some background: some months ago, a conservative campus group invited libertarian political scientist Charles Murray to speak. Murray's most controversial book was his 1994 *The Bell Curve*. In that work, Murray argued the indisputable point that IQ is strongly correlated with labour market success; that IQ is between 40 per cent and 80 per cent heritable; and, most provocatively, that IQ varies among ethnic and racial groups.

On average, *The Bell Curve* posited in its infamous chapter 13, blacks have a lower IQ than whites, who have a lower IQ than Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese. Murray had not come to Middlebury to persuade the community of any of this. He had been invited to discuss his 2012 book *Coming Apart*, a prescient and widely respected work about the nation's social, economic, and political divide. No matter. Protesters had absorbed the catechism of race, gender and sexual orientation they had learned from their professors and were certain they had a heretic in their midst. They stamped their feet and shouted for a full 20 minutes before he could utter a few words. As Murray stood silently at the podium waiting for the chance to continue, their loud collective chants - "Charles Murray go away! Racist, sexist, anti-gay!" "Who is the enemy? White supremacy!" "Black lives matter!" filled the 400-person hall.

The organisers finally ushered Murray and his discussant, an international politics and economics professor at Middlebury named Allison Stanger, to a secret location where the discussion was to be broadcast to interested students via live web stream. However, the protesters discovered their whereabouts and proceeded to pound the walls of the room and set off fire alarms. Somehow Murray and Stanger managed to complete a civil, tough-minded back-and-forth, but the zealots were not finished. They followed the two discussants and their bodyguards as they prepared to leave campus. Some of the faithful wore black ski masks. The group "surrounded the car, banging on the sides and the windows and rocking the car, climbing on to the hood", in Murray's words.

During the melee, protesters damaged the car and put Stanger in hospital. She was released that night, in a neck brace. "I feared for my life," she recollected on Facebook several days later. In his own retrospective, Murray described the events as an "inflection point" at which America's universities would have to choose whether they would support open and free debate or give in to the "intellectual thugs". "If this kind of protest becomes the new normal, the number of colleges willing to let themselves in for an experience like Middlebury's will plunge to near zero. "A campus where a majority of students are fearful to speak openly because they know a minority will jump on them is no longer an intellectually free campus in any meaningful sense."

Do Australians really need to worry that the events at Middlebury foreshadow the future of their own universities? They would be naive not to. Speech codes and coercive hyper-sensitivity to once marginalised groups have already become *de rigueur* here much as they are in the US. Those codes do, indeed, make students "fearful to speak openly". The University of Western Australia Student Guild voted recently to change the date of Australia Day and to ban future campus celebrations on January 26. According to the Institute for Public Affairs, a few members opposed the move, arguing that Australia Day is one of "inclusivity and gratitude". "Many indigenous and non-indigenous students are against changing the date," one student asserted. He was shouted down with cries of "shame!", a startling word coming from this most progressive of generations.

The IPA has also reported that words with "man" in it, such as "sportsmanlike" and "mankind", have become offensive at some schools. Several institutions are expanding the definition of harassment to include almost anything that makes a student feel "uncomfortable". A longer catalogue of forbidden speech and behaviour is bound to follow. Identity group segregation ensures students will find plenty of opportunities for feeling "uncomfortable". The curriculum at most Australian universities is designed to define history and culture entirely as the struggle of minority groups in the face of an oppressive society. Sights, whether imagined or real, are the currency with which the groups pronounce their own virtue.

The Racial Discrimination Act's vaguely worded section 18C puts government muscle behind their complaints, though fortunately the courts have been unable or unwilling to find in their favour in many cases. And, of course, Australia is no stranger to student protests. In 2014 and 2016, students rallied against federal budget cuts and feared tuition rises at universities. They blocked traffic in Melbourne and Sydney and engaged in scuffles with police. The demonstration culminated in several arrests and a cancelled visit to Victoria's Deakin University by Tony Abbott. In 2015, students at the University of Western Australia and at Flinders University in Adelaide protested against a proposed research centre to be run by the Danish climate science sceptic Bjorn Lomborg.

That same year a pro-Palestinian group at the University of Sydney shouted down a lecture by British army colonel Richard Kemp about the ethics of counter-terrorism strategies with chants of: "Richard Kemp, you can't hide! You support genocide." The group included at least one faculty member, Jake Lynch, a vocal supporter of the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel, who also happens to be the director of the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre. Whatever the problems posed by these incidents for university administrators, law enforcement officials and commuters, they do not quite reach the level of religious fervour that beset the idyllic Middlebury campus. The Kemp protest, by far the most disturbing of the three, proves that anti-Semitism and tolerance for designated victimised minorities, no matter how extreme their views, are accepted by some in the academy.

But the extremists appear to have been a marginal group with little appeal to the broader university community. The tuition demonstrations were about students' wallets, guaranteed to always bring out the protest signs everywhere. The Lomborg incident is a more disturbing sign of Australian intolerance. Lomborg's distrust of the worst predictions of climate scientists have been deemed deplorable on most campuses in Australia and the US. It could be argued in this case that the controversy was not about Lomborg's ideas per se, but about an expensive research centre, partly funded by the Australian government. Whatever the merits of the centre, its expense in a world of limited resources was surely a matter of debate. But there is every reason to suspect Lomborg's unpopular theories settled the matter.

Still, there are reasons why things escalated in the US and not Australia at this particular time. They are worth pondering. First among those reasons is the unique structure of the American university. Unlike Australia where most students are commuters living off campus, US four-year schools are residential. Most students are affluent; a year at Middlebury costs about \$US64,000 (A\$84,000), close to the norm for elite private institutions these days. They arrive fresh from childhoods filled with swimming and music lessons, soccer leagues, and ski and European trips with mum and dad. Many, perhaps even most, of them remain on campus for four full years. These facts are crucial to the religious intensity of the American scene. Adolescents are the most tribal of human beings, desperate to fit in with their clan and prove their bona fides to their peers.

Add the disorientation of being on their own and relatively unsupervised for the first time in their lives, and perhaps loneliness to boot, and you get a campus highly vulnerable to contagious youthful obsessions. "The people in the audience who wanted to hear me speak were completely cowed," Murray wrote in his Middlebury account. It's not surprising. The terror of being pointed out and shunned by the people with whom they share meals, dormitories, classes and leisure has to be a powerful censor for most 18-year-olds. It's also a strong temptation to the inevitable bullies among them. Making matters worse are the dormitories themselves. American students who go to public high schools have little choice but to study and socialise with many kinds of fellow students.

On many campuses, however, when they arrive they are often ghettoised into black, Hispanic, LGBTQ and white residences. With a constant drumbeat of diversity talk, including intensive orientation meetings, the minority dorms become the university's sign to everyone of the virtuous other. Commuting students, on the other hand, are at least somewhat spared the tyranny of the identity politics of the faculty and campus in-group for the simple reason that they have lives, friends and loved ones outside the ivy walls. The Occidental College sociologist Lisa Wade calls the American university a "total institution". By comparison, the Australian university is a partial institution with a more moderate role in the lives of students.

Also aggravating campus intolerance in the US is Donald Trump. Students were already prone to accepting the trinity of racism, sexism and homophobia; the Trump era has intensified their devotion exponentially. The stakes when confronted with a visitor such as Murray, said to espouse a racist ideology, were very high indeed. Many doubtless had come to believe that they were the only thing standing between freedom and sin itself. The President has not made much effort to temper these passions, failing to explain radical policy shifts and giving plenty of reason to be suspicious of his motives. The third and related reason that American students may be more at risk of joining an impassioned mob at this moment than their Australian peers is the former's class and economic isolation.

These divisions pre-date the election of Trump; indeed, they are one of the reasons he was elected in the first place. Schools such as Middlebury have become ghettos for the children of America's upper middle class. Even most of the "students of colour", as they are described, come from the comfortable homes of Indian doctors and African-American professors. Few have had much contact with the more than half of the country that doesn't share either their cosmopolitan tastes in clothes, food and media, their access to good education, or their comfortable family lives. They are not used to suffering serious consequences for their actions. Ironically, it was precisely this tragic American divide that was supposed to be the topic of Murray's Middlebury talk.

Coming Apart describes "the bubble" that protects America's professional and creative class from the harshness of working class life as well as poverty and the values that often develop in response to it. As one-time Middlebury professor and my former editor Myron Magnet noted in response to l'affaire Murray, the naive Middlebury students are exactly the sorts who could most benefit from Murray's analysis. Alas, it was not to be. Australia may not yet have descended into Middlebury's religious madness. But the episode showed that substituting doctrinal conviction for reason is a dangerous game for universities. It's not just the principle of free speech that comes under threat; logical distinctions, scepticism, subtlety, context and reading itself yield to shared dogma impervious to question.

Murray had to be "racist, sexist, anti-gay", though he supports same-sex marriage (and did so considerably before Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton). He had to be a "white supremacist", though he had married a Thai woman and has two biracial children. One student held a sign saying "No eugenics!", though the libertarian Murray is about as far from a eugenicist as the Pope. Stanger was surprised to find out some of her protesting colleagues openly admitting they had not read anything he had written. If professors refused to know anything about their purported enemy except that he is a sinner, why should students do otherwise? The Middlebury website claims "we emphasise reflection, discussion, and intensive interactions between students and faculty members". The entry needs a rewrite.

The school has rid itself of reflection and rational discussion. Now it is left with only "intensive interactions", though perhaps not in the form the administration imagined. Australians should learn from their mistake.

**Source:** Kay Hymowitz