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A wide climate of fear menaces free speech

It's not only young people who are allowing intolerance of other opinions to grow

KEMI BADENOCH



Free speech is never out of the news. Although if Labour had had their way yesterday, Parliament would certainly have stopped newspapers from speaking freely. Thankfully, we defeated their proposals to muzzle the press, including the absurd idea that newspapers should be forced to cover their opponents' legal costs whether they won or lost. Andrew Norfolk, the journalist who uncovered the Rotherham child abuse scandal, noted that if these proposals had been in place at the time, "it is inconceivable that we would even have published that article in the first place".

I don't take free speech for granted because I grew up in Nigeria, where writers were killed for protesting against the government, and newspaper editors died after spending parcel bombs. Yet freedom of expression remains under constant pressure in Britain and too many people have become complacent.

In a paper I've written for the *Freeer* initiative, published today, I highlight a new frost that's appeared in the battle not just for freedom of speech, but for diversity of thought and freedom of association, and it needs to be tackled fast.

The regular vilification of those who dare to challenge a consensus view is creating a climate of fear that undermines these long-held freedoms. Virtual witch hunts now congregate online to intimidate anyone who doesn't pass the test of "acceptable" comment. People are scared to speak out against the status quo: their jobs and livelihoods, they believe, are at risk. Companies such as Paper Chase have found themselves having to issue grovelling apologies for advertising in the mainstream press because a few people online didn't like the paper in question.

This isn't about millennials or students "no-platforming" speakers they dislike. In fact, younger people who've grown up living their lives on social media are more likely to be targeted, and they are terrified.

There is another worrying dimension to this: free speech advocates are often accused of defending hate speech. The charge is that they've never faced discrimination themselves and merely seek to defend already privileged groups. As someone who is black and female, I understand this concern. Ultimately, however, this approach conflates a number of underlying issues and the result is less robust and transparent debate, silencing down, rather than engaging down, views people don't like.

Rigour and prejudice are not unique to groups that have held privilege, and silencing views to entire groups rather than to specific individuals is illiberal. The best way to fight bigotry, as ever, is through free expression, so that noxious views - as opposed to abuse - can be publicly debated and challenged.

So the limiting of free speech should not be dismissed as a problem only among students on university campuses. It is prevalent across society. Nor should we look for a solution involving greater legal interventions or further laws.

In order to defend freedom of expression, we each need to exercise personal responsibility. We need to make good choices about how we behave, based not on fear of strong legal repercussions or fear of the mob, but out of respect for ourselves and others. We also need to look beyond our personal discordant, see the bigger picture - and stand up for what is right. We must all play our part in this, whether we are personally affected by restrictions on freedom of our expression or not.

Labour's dangerous amendment on press freedom was defeated only narrowly yesterday, and the enemies of free expression will no doubt return in a different form. In his 2002 book, *The First Freedom*, the late ITN news editor Robert Large wrote illustrated how the principle of free speech had to be thought out by each succeeding generation throughout the ages. The battle, he says, is never over and is constantly changing.

But free speech is too important for any of us to be complacent about. Those of us with strong voices need to speak out now to save it for the future, and for those who are too scared to express themselves today.

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