

Hate-speech laws are themselves hateful

They are a windfall to the politically correct who wish to censor other views

By Lorne Gunter, edmontonjournal.com July 4, 2010

What the Anne Coulter controversy points out is how insidious are Canada's hate-speech laws.

They permit censorious activists to attempt to shut up those with whom they disagree while in the same breath claiming to be defenders of free speech, themselves.

Hate speech laws offer cover for the politically correct. The laws help PC activists enforce a narrow view of what is and isn't acceptable to say about immigration, religion, sexual equality, gay rights and ideology while at the same time insisting they fully support the Charter's freedom of expression.

How convenient.

Supporting free speech can be tough if you have to stomach views with which you vehemently disagree. But if you can successfully label your opponents' views as hateful, you can place their words beyond constitutional protections, which permits you to have them censored while still insisting you are a defender of full, robust debate.

Last March, when the outrageous American conservative columnist Anne Coulter proposed to speak on the campus of the University of Ottawa, university administrators attempted to "chill" her remarks by warning her to watch her tongue even before she had arrived in Canada.

Vice-president and provost Francois Houle sneered in an e-mail that Coulter should "educate" herself about what kinds of speech are and are not acceptable in Canada "before your planned visit here." Canada draws a line between hate speech and free speech he scoffed. If Ms. Coulter was not careful, she could find herself facing a human rights complaint, lawsuit or even criminal charges.

That's just smug and patronizing. The idea a country may draw a distinction between free speech and hate speech is both self-contradictory and self-delusional. By definition, if a country rules numerous forms of speech off-limits, it has not found some unique, new characteristic of free expression, it has merely put a false front on its instincts for censorship -- a false front designed to conceal from itself, as much as from the outside world, the true nature of its feelings toward free speech.

It turns out the real censor at the U of O was not Houle, though, but rather his boss Allan Rock, the former Liberal justice minister who now serves as the university's president. According to access-to-information documents obtained by the Canadian Press, Rock -- who presided over the introduction of the gun registry -- wrote to Houle the day before Houle wrote to Coulter instructing his vice-president to inform her of the potential consequences should she go ahead with her speech.

He added, gratuitously, that "Coulter is a mean-spirited, small-minded, foul-mouthed poltroon." (Who still uses the word poltroon?) "She is an ill-informed and deeply offensive shill for a profoundly shallow and ignorant view of the world. She is a malignancy on the body politic. She is a disgrace to the broadcasting industry and a leading example of the dramatic decline in the quality of public discourse in recent times."

Funny, there are lots of gun owners and divorced dads who hold much the same opinion about Rock. (In addition to imposing intrusive controls on law-abiding gun owners, Rock also changed the country's divorce laws so fathers paying child support have to pay the income taxes owing on those payments, too, rather than having them paid by their ex-wives, who are the recipients of the financial benefit.)

Admittedly, Rock and Houle are not the only Canadians who have sought to stifle the words of those with whom they disagree. The Conservative government has kept out of the country the controversial pro-Palestinian British MP George Galloway and Muslim televangelist Zakir Naik, who lives in Mumbai, India.

Naik, who has made many hateful remarks about Jews, gays and the West, nonetheless spoke by teleconference link to the conference to which he had been invited in Toronto. Galloway made similar arrangements to have his remarks heard by Canadians audiences. So their words got through the Tories' ban, even if they did not.

And since it is these gentlemen's words that censors fear, the government's actions had no impact other than to deny the pair the ability to come here personally.

At least Coulter made it here. The University of Ottawa lacked the power of the federal government to deny her entry to the country. It ultimately cancelled her appearance on campus, giving into the risk of violence posed by an outraged mob outside her venue -- the lawless were permitted to dictate the actions of the law-abiding.

Libs want it both ways

But the point is, the instinct to shut up one's opponents is not unique to the Canadian liberal-left, even if they and the human rights commissions they defend are currently the biggest threats to free expression.

I sense that were family traditionalists or social conservatives in control of our political, culture and media elites, they would claim to be defenders of free speech while similarly indulging in efforts to define away the views of those whose opinions angered them.

It's simply far too easy to see one's own views as perfectly reasonable and fact-based, while dismissing one's opponents' as prejudiced and misinformed.

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