

# Freedom of Speech is a Luxury we can Ill Afford

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When most of us talk about freedom of speech, what we're actually talking about is articulated freedom of thought. To effect socio-political change we need to consider freedom of speech a luxury and take more care when verbally unleashing our thoughts into the world.

Speech, and indeed language itself, is compromise and we make these compromises daily. They are self-selected based on our role or position in society – a combination of idiom and good manners. When we're emotionally charged, for example when we're angry, we may become more aware of this selection. If someone cuts me off when I'm driving alone then I'm liable to let out a barrage of verbal artillery secure in the privacy of my own car. If someone carelessly bumps into me in the street, a public place, then I will self-censor my response, and even find myself apologising for their clumsiness.

Speech is also filtered by our knowledge of language. When I walk through a misty autumn beech wood early on a clear, blue day I will automatically respond to the golden hues, the swirling mist, and the coursing rays of the sunrise. But if I try to try to put this into words at the time my choices will feel insufficient and clumsy. When I sit down to write about it I can make a decent stab at a description, albeit with pause, consideration and a few scribbles out, but even so I'm constrained by my vocabulary and the existence of appropriate words in the English language.

Our personal interactions are therefore governed by a combination of linguistic ability and social ethics, worn like a second skin and taken with us wherever we go. To this extent our freedom of speech is filtered and we generally expect the same of others.

Some would go further. Amnesty UK says that, 'in certain circumstances free speech and freedom of expression can be restricted.' For example, 'governments have an obligation to prohibit hate speech and incitement.' Many would agree, and yet if five people discussed this at dinner there would be at least six views about where exactly the line should be drawn. While in principle freedom of speech should be protected, there is an extent to which society at large accepts that there are limitations.

My professional life is based on my willingness to constrain some my own freedoms in favour of nuance and the framing of issues and values inside a socio-political narrative. I bring challenging topics to hard-to-reach audiences to build consensus around difficult political goals. Much of this work centres on sustainable agriculture – helping to change the way land is managed to improve environmental outcomes and farm animal welfare.

As part of this work, I have helped opposing groups find common ground on contentious issues, for example religious slaughter. In the UK there has been a strong drive by veterinary groups to end religious slaughter and to label meat products slaughtered using the halal or

Shechita methods as ‘unstunned’. Not surprisingly, Jewish groups in particular have strongly opposed this. The debate has raged for a generation, and yet last year my organization was able to bring key stakeholders together, find common ground, and present a mutually supported labelling option to the UK Government. Compromise required each side to bite hard on their tongues and to temper the language they used towards each other. I was able to absorb the verbal artillery from separate organizations, so that when stakeholders faced each other the tone remained civil. Agreement centred on the labelling of all methods of slaughter. One side accepted the desirability of clear labelling, while the other recognised that religious slaughter is one of many challenging slaughter methods commonly used (such as electric water baths and CO2 gas stunning), meaning that it was arguably unfair to focus only on halal and Shechita. Each side has been able to maintain its position on religious slaughter, while agreeing on an acceptable way forward on labelling that would better empower citizens to make their own choices.

Progress becomes possible when people are persuaded to temper their bombast and adjust their choice of words so that they can listen to each other more carefully. Our labelling solution has been welcomed by ministers, but whether or not it is delivered for the market place will depend largely on the manner in which the UK leaves the European Union.

Importantly, I also happen to believe that, given the chance, all people are inherently good, and that all people have a right to think what they think. Unfortunately, the UK’s ‘first past the post’ political system embeds division and perpetuates artificial polarization. In a normal, natural conversation people seek common ground, but in adversarial politics difference becomes the unique selling point that parties present to voters. Sometimes this is annoying, sometimes it prevents social progress, and sometimes it’s just plain dangerous.

Climate change policy is a perfect example of the latter. The most recent document from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change can be summarized as a wake-up call to natural


catastrophe. The IPCC also reported that governments are so far failing to achieve adequate reductions in global warming emissions.

Astonishingly, this is an issue around which there was relative consensus 30 years ago – yet in the intervening period climate change has become divisive, and debate has become polarised predominantly along left/right political lines.

I think there are two reasons for this. Firstly, demonstrably, fossil fuel companies have conspired to spread disinformation on climate change often based on bizarre theories and the cherry-picking of scientific anomaly. They have done this to protect their commercial interests just as Big Tobacco conspired to hide the links between smoking and cancer. Secondly, left-leaning environmental groups have campaigned noisily in language and perspectives that appealed to motivated, like-minded people but which failed to connect with the majority. Not only that, but campaigns were judgemental and

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tended almost exclusively to favour statist solutions. More recently other groups have used global warming as a proxy to promote left-wing economic and social change.

This combination has been toxic and many on the right have allowed themselves to be influenced by the conspiracy theories pedalled by the fossil fuel industry because they feared and resented the solutions being presented by the left. It is hard to hear truth when people are attacking your core beliefs.

Five years ago in Britain, no more than a handful of Conservative MPs would publicly admit to concerns about climate change. This meant that debate about the existence of global warming persisted at exactly the time we needed to be debating solutions. An even smaller handful of us found this deeply worrying – but we thought we had the answer.

It lay in language, the framing of values, and the quality of the narrative. Today at least 40 Conservative MPs talk openly about climate action, and the Conservative Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs is arguably doing more to promote and deliver progress in this area than any of his predecessors. So how did we do it?

Firstly, we had to accept that the language we were using was wrong. The iconic image of the polar bear on a melting ice floe was damaging the cause; we needed alternative narrative champions. Many on the left are globalists and mobilised by injustice far from home. Many on the right are motivated by impacts in their own nations and communities. Both left and right care passionately, but about different things.

Freedom of speech, the freedom to scream and shout, had arguably led to half the population sticking their fingers in their ears. We needed a more reflective and intelligent analysis, which was, at first at least, deeply challenging for many left-wing environmental campaigners and campaigning organizations.

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Instead of presenting polar bears and starving African children, instead of hectoring and waving placards on the streets, we talked calmly to influential people about food production, military risk manage-

ment, and migration.

We changed the language we used to appeal directly to centre-right values. We spoke of loyalty, patriotism, duties, pride, protection, liberty, structure, stability, of living within our means, of our repairing lease with nature, and of individual responsibility. We recognised conservative resistance to changing rules and their inclination towards freedom from bureaucracy and state interference.

We chose alternate narratives, using pictures of flooded English villages, stranded cars, and citizens being rescued by emergency workers in dinghies. We discussed global pinch points and conflict; the threat multiplier effect of extreme weather and crop failure, and the impact of war on the movement of people. We discussed zoonotic diseases, and the northward migration of bugs and pests that could despoil woodlands and landscapes. We talked about UK food production and the impact of poorly managed climate risk on rural communities and economies.

Secondly, we recognized that neither the left nor the right have a monopoly on solutions. If regulatory intervention and tax and spend was inherently off-putting to Conservatives, we needed to empower them both to care about the issue and have space to come up with their own solutions. For many campaigners, it is extremely difficult to cede power, but this was exactly what was required to make progress. We worked quietly and closely with the Conservative Environment Network and others associated with the party to help motivated MPs take control of the climate change policy narrative inside their own party, and to begin to see climate policy as an electoral opportunity. The difference is dramatic. Now in Britain, both Government and Opposition parties are

focussed on solutions. Progress is still far from rapid, but we have turned a corner.

Campaign groups are starting to catch up with the mad men of advertising who have understood, for decades, the importance of language and the framing of issues. But even as campaigners have tried to emulate the advertising industry's success, they have failed to acknowledge and tackle the central difference. Campaigners care about more than just selling something – they want to fundamentally shift hearts and minds for the long term and they generally want to control the policy solutions.

This brings us to Donald Trump, the mad man of US politics. Trump is a salesman, an advertising guy, with few apparent principles. He is content to use language to set off an explosion and to pitch his tent alongside the people who cheer loudest at the blast. While nationalism has been on the rise again for the last decade, the difference in the United States is the manner in which Trump has wielded the language of populism coupled with his relative indifference to the consequences

Trump has been ridiculed for his poor English, his love of television and Fox News, and his use of social media, particularly Twitter. But those who ridicule the US president should note that by lashing out impulsively and, by saying what he thinks, he has brought an exciting and refreshing tone to politics in a country where every last political utterance is normally tightly controlled. He is saying what other people think; he is using values to connect with struggling communities up and down the USA, and framing his diatribes in language people understand and respond to because it's the language they use themselves in the bar or during breaks at the big game.

Arguably Mr. Trump is the anti-Obama. Obama's message was one of hope, which fizzled and guttered when he gained office because he was part of the establishment and because his legislative programme became bogged down in Congress. The reforms Obama promised were slow to materialise and often became heavily diluted. Trump was able to capitalize on this. Many blue collar Americans felt no better off

under Obama and watched as their aspirations and communities were crushed by globalization. They wanted someone to blame, and Trump told them that that was okay; that they were right to blame the establishment, to delegate responsibility, and he made it clear that he was on their side. Where Obama's message was of hope, Trump's was of blame, fear and hate – blame foreigners, fear Muslims, hate Obama and Clinton – and, sadly, blame, fear and hate are easy to sell. They are products that people with little control over their own lives are often all too happy to buy. There is an instant, easy satisfaction in blaming someone else for the problem, while solution-building requires effort and a commitment to the long haul.

The challenge for progressive Americans is to extract the positive lessons from this hugely divisive and wounding presidency. But the lessons are there. Trump has used the language of ordinary people – progressives can do that too. He has listened to poor and left-behind communities and played on their fears to draft his slogans – progressives must listen more closely to blue collar communities so that they can start transforming economic depression into new industry and opportunity. Trump has used Twitter to connect with people in real time in a less guarded manner – progressives can learn to be more open and direct as well.

In Britain we have similar challenges. Brexit is happening because of a surge of latent populism. The phrase Take Back Control was deployed to devastating effect in the referendum campaign because so many people felt that they had so little control over their lives and opportunities. The European Union became the bogeyman of choice, despite the fact that many of the issues people were upset by were actually controlled by their local council or by Westminster. Take Back Control conjured hope out of negativity and the political establishment is still reeling because it had no idea that so many Britons were so disaffected.

Immigration was also a central theme, and the political elite have so far failed to grapple honestly with this key insight from the vote. Many working class Britons are feeling the pinch because young,

often male immigrants have been able to come to Britain temporarily, work with low overheads and undercut local businesses. When I moved house a few years ago a team of Eastern Europeans with a rented van quoted a price that was less than a quarter of the quote offered by a British company with big infrastructural overheads. Of course I chose the cheaper quote – few wouldn't – and the Eastern European guys worked brilliantly. This reality has caused genuine, understandable resentment, based not on racism, but on hardship and a sense of injustice.

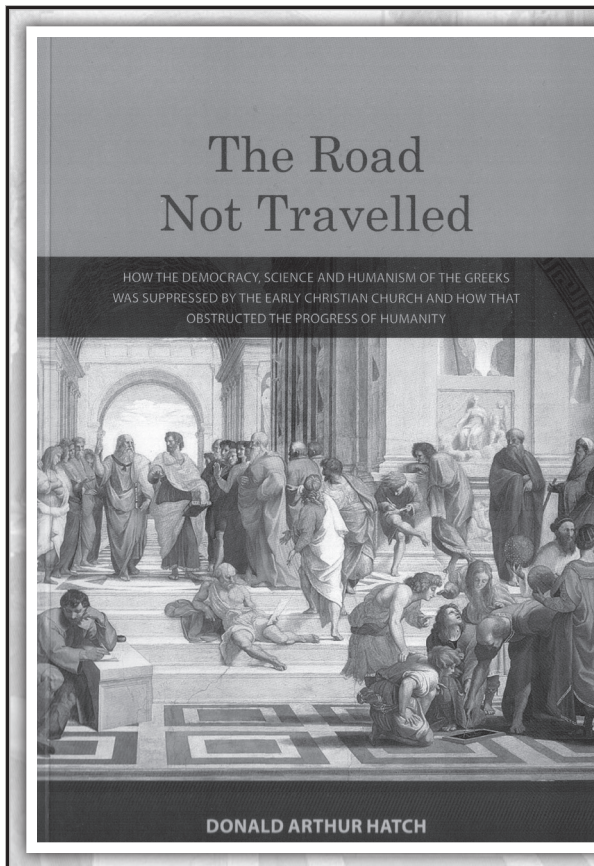
For anti-free market liberals 'freedom of movement' is progressive and sacrosanct. Yet if we change the language and talk instead about stemming the 'free market in labour' then many left-wingers suddenly become more open to change. The free market in labour has become a gateway for nationalist resentment and politicians must now find a progressive way of cur-tailing it. Until they do, poisonous populists will be able to rally disaffected people behind their

Britain First, America First, Poland, France, Brazil and Australia First agendas.

Language counts. Listening matters. To effect change it is imperative to choose words carefully. Politicians and campaigners have to bite down on what they really think and focus hard on the best use of language, on the most valuable frames and the most potent narratives, and only then can we fight prejudice, environmental disaster, and injustice successfully.

Our freedom to think before we speak gives us the power to use language and compassionate understanding to effect lasting change. Freedom of speech, however, is too expensive a luxury. •

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