



Political Correctness = Fear

“I disapprove of what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it.”

This aphorism has long been attributed to French philosopher Voltaire (born Francois-Marie Arouet, 1694-1778), although some believe it the work of SG Tallentyre in her biography “The Friends of Voltaire”, where she summarised his attitude toward another writer’s controversial book. No matter who is responsible, the phrase accurately defined Voltaire’s philosophy of individual liberty.

Central to this philosophy is freedom of speech, something we in the western world take for granted. New Zealanders turning 70 this year were born the year the Second World War started, which means that most of us here today have no experience of that dark time and no concept of living in a country where freedoms are severely restricted or unknown.

My own experience of totalitarianism was limited to a visit to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in the early 1980s. The Berlin Wall was several years from falling and the Iron Curtain appeared as fortified as ever. My Bulgarian visa was valid for a mere 48 hours with strict instructions as to where I stayed and went. The country was bleak, grey and poor, there was virtually nothing to buy and the people were reluctant to engage in conversation. Yugoslavia was different in that though its people still endured a markedly lower standard of living than their western counterparts – the daily sight of long queues for basic food items will stay with me forever - it was not a member of the Soviet-lead Warsaw Pact. The late President Tito had long defied Moscow by allowing his people certain freedoms, e.g. to travel outside its borders and to engage in limited private enterprise. Having said that, the people I met, although considerably more outgoing than those in Bulgaria, were still mindful of what they discussed with strangers.

A better example was one related in the late 1970s by a family friend who travelled to the former West Germany annually on business. One year he had the opportunity to visit East Berlin for the first time, where his contact invited him home to meet his wife and family, the latter of which consisted of two teenage sons and his elderly parents. Our friend – let’s call him Bob – always carried a few family photos and upon request brought them out to show his hosts, particularly the boys, who were keen to know about faraway New Zealand. They enthusiastically commented that “your government provides wonderful homes and vehicles!”

As diplomatically as possible, Bob explained that he and his wife saved up for their house and cars over time, buying them personally. He tried to lighten the situation by joking that they certainly lived more modestly in the earlier days of their marriage. The teenagers flatly refused to believe him, while their parents, Bob’s contemporaries, also looked askance at the concept of private ownership. At that point the grandparents leaned over and addressed him for the first time, nodding

quietly. They well remembered the days before German communism and the Third Reich, but their children and grandchildren simply wouldn’t listen.

Thirty years on, that story still horrifies me.

That a government in modern times could wield so much power as to blatantly deceive its population, so much so that younger citizens firmly disbelieved any contradictory viewpoint held by close elder relatives.

So what has that to do with political correctness? In a word, control.

Freedom and control are diametrically opposed. The measure of a country’s freedom lies in how far the balance tips either way. Thomas Jefferson, third US President and principal architect of its Declaration of Independence said that the natural progression of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground. In other words, the struggle for freedom is ongoing and hard going.

Once upon a time, people controlled other people via the club, the mace, the spear and the arrow. It was brutal and effective. Centuries later, weaponry has developed to include the gun, the bomb and the nuclear warhead. They are brutal and effective. But today, in more peaceful parts of the world, there is a more subtle, cheaper form of civil control. It is much less messy, but remains powerfully effective and yes, its effects can be brutal.

It is, of course, the placing of restrictions upon free speech, thereby interfering with one’s right to hold opinions without fear of persecution. Political correctness, as I have said before, dictates thought and behaviour by the imposition of certain beliefs to which everybody must adhere or be ridiculed or punished. It conjures images of an angry mob of finger-pointers towering over a cowering individual for committing the cardinal sin of speaking her mind. It is ironic that those who scream against intolerance are themselves so often guilty.

And for those who would defend the process by suggesting that political correctness prevents Peter from making derogatory remarks against Pita or Peta, I again refer to Mr Jefferson. In his lifelong defence of the rights of the individual, he eloquently said that errors of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it. He understood that respect for free speech automatically includes the toleration of dissenting viewpoints. He rightly saw that two wrongs did not make a right, that censorship of the individual to stop incivility was precisely the wrong way to go about it. That, in fact, in order to combat it, freedom of expression was paramount.

Voltaire would have cheered. ■