

The Liberal Mind and its Oppression Quotient

Israel Folau's recent social media comments on the posthumous fate of homosexuals deeply upset Australian progressive opinion. Folau's Christian convictions, founded on a literal interpretation of passages in Leviticus and Romans, evoked a storm of international condemnation. Archaic and "prehistoric" views, he was told, had no place in either modern Australia or in its "diverse and inclusive" sporting scene. After much agonised counselling, inclusivity-aware Rugby Australia decided not to punish Folau but, in the words of Rugby Australia CEO, Raelene Castle, "continue the dialogue".

Elsewhere in the progressive firmament, the impeccably liberal King's College professor of international political theory, Richard "Ned" Lebow, found himself in hot water at the International Studies Association in San Francisco for making a "lame joke" in a crowded lift at an academic conference. Asked "Which floor?" he called out, "Ladies lingerie!" His attempted witticism offended a gender studies professor and earned him a reprimand for "inappropriate and offensive" behaviour as well as the requirement to apologise, which he declined.

As Lebow faced academic retribution, elsewhere in the US the black rapper Kanye West offended prevailing liberal sensibilities by claiming in a radio interview that "slavery was a choice", an excuse for Afro-American failure and "a form of mental imprisonment". His progressive interviewer was "appalled" and "unbelievably hurt" by West's remarks.

From a very different perspective, Queensland Young Australian of the Year (2015) and former member of the Council for Australian-Arab relations, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, posted on Anzac Day 2017, "Lest we forget (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)" a comment conservative Australians considered extremely disrespectful. Barnaby Joyce questioned her appointment to positions representing Australia abroad or as host of a state-funded television show.

Abdel-Magied subsequently moved to London

where she will have enjoyed a favourable reception for her views amongst those who, like Oxford-educated barrister and "human rights worker" Afua Hirsch, consider Britain a racist dystopian nightmare, want Nelson's Column pulled down and support the movement to remove symbols of empire, such as statues of Cecil Rhodes, from UK campuses.

While these controversial views are tolerated on UK, US and Australian campuses, others receive no platform, or more accurately are silenced. Even radical feminists who question proposed changes to the UK Gender Recognition Act allowing people to "self-determine" their gender, find themselves branded "transphobic". University student unions routinely no-platform feminists like Germaine Greer and Linda Bellos. At a Hyde Park rally in April that descended into violence, Action for Trans Health tweeted that "violence against terfs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists) is always self defence". As transgender activist Josh Jackman explains, feminists who critique gender identity are guilty of hate crime. Both sides accuse each other of "hate speech".

From their different identitarian perspectives, these cases exemplify the problem of what constitutes hate speech. Attempting to shed light on the difficulty, University of Queensland Professor Katherine Gelber argued, in an ABC opinion piece, "that the responsibility that attaches to freedom of speech is the responsibility not to use one's words ... to hurt others". Yet if any criticism of a community constitutes "hurt" in the eyes of that *soi-disant* community, Gelber's interpretation would effectively silence any space for free comment. Evidently this doesn't concern Professor Gelber, who further maintained that though "of concern", Folau's comments failed to reach "the threshold of vilification, by which is meant that the comment was capable of inciting hatred in its audience against a member of the targeted group".

But what, we might wonder, is this elusive threshold? How do we know when we have crossed

it—and do we need Professor Gelber on hand to act as a speech referee handing out yellow and red cards as the occasion demands?

The threshold problem goes to the core of modern, secular, liberal political morality. Founded on an intellectual compromise so extensive that it tries to include all the guiding beliefs of Western opinion, contemporary liberalism came to clasp to its capacious bosom self-pitying victims in all their diversity. It aspired through this embrace of difference to achieve harmony through tolerance of the intolerant and peace through conversation.

In his unjustly neglected and prescient book *The Liberal Mind* (1963), Kenneth Minogue observed that the contemporary liberal persona developed from a secular and improving sensibility that found the present condition distasteful not because it is dull, comfortable or transient, but because it contains suffering. In its Enlightenment rationalist pursuit of both truth and improvement this progressive perspective evinced a growing distaste for “suffering situations”. The liberal, always ill-at-ease in the nation-state, found victims everywhere and sought hubristically to alleviate their pain both locally and globally.

A thoroughly ideological project, modern liberal progressivism promotes a seemingly scientific morality arising from a single rational viewpoint that promises to harmonise all human relations. As it turned into governmental policy and practice in the late twentieth century, its meliorist conception of improvement required bureaucratic systems to measure performance and impose morally improving behaviour upon the general population.

In the context of the progressive dilemma concerning hate speech, free speech and its seething and suffering victims, it is not the principle of free speech that concerns the progressive mind, but the degree of relative oppression that may have occasioned a potentially harmful remark. How do we measure oppression—and what happens, when, as in the case of turf war, oppressions clash?

From the IQ to the OQ test

The identity oppression syndrome beautifully captures the dilemma that a liberal, progressive order encounters in its attempt to achieve an inclusive, egalitarian and harmonious order, freely obeyed. As it serves a rationalist project, however,

the progressive mind always searches for and finds a rational solution. The solution requires both measurement and an index.

A brief historical excursion through recent developments in progressive thinking explains how the oppression index evolved. In the aftermath of 1945, the Western liberal elite initially identified equality of opportunity as the challenge to future progress and sought to assess and promote ability, regardless of race, creed or gender, according to the measure of intelligence. In 1950s Britain an IQ test at eleven years of age decided those fit for a grammar school education and those more suited to a technical, secondary education. The test, however, came in for progressive criticism in terms of its rigour, its apparent cultural biases and its discrimination.

In the post-1968 world of emancipation, rainbow coalitions, feminism, civil rights and multiculturalism, the progressive mind lost interest in equality of opportunity and focused instead on the problem of diversity and equality of outcome. John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1972) captured the new mood, and Anglospheric bureaucracies busied themselves with finding new criteria for measuring need, based on exclusion and discrimination on grounds of race and gender. From the 1980s applications for public sector jobs required applicants not only to state their gender, but also their ethnicity, rather than their citizenship.

Advertisements for tertiary education posts regularly announced that due to gender imbalances in university departments, committees would look to appoint female candidates. The criteria soon expanded to include ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation.

By the late 1980s, radical London boroughs began experimenting with projects to correct institutional racism and sexism and measure the change. Brent Council, in North London, whose local MP was the future London mayor Ken Livingstone, pioneered its Development Programme for Racial Equality to ensure the rapid promotion of candidates on grounds of ethnicity, gender and disability and expose the sexism and racism of the school curriculum as well as that of the local-authority school teachers who taught it.

A crude approximation of an oppression quotient quickly emerged: ethnicity, black, Asian or even Irish counted as +1, female gender also counted +1 as did homosexuality or lesbianism. Disability also received a positive coding, as too did Islam, an oppressed religion, but not Christianity or Judaism,

*Born with an
Enlightenment
contempt for tradition
and a critical view
of the present, the
progressive mind has
always sought and
fought for causes.*

which were both negatively coded -1. The white, male heterosexual served as ground zero and, in time, for less than zero, especially if he misguidedly celebrated any historic attachment to his native culture.

Branded, at the time, as a utopian fantasy of the “the loony Left”, this approach to measuring oppression and addressing its suffering eventually achieved universal progressive acceptance. As it dawned on the improving post-colonial liberal mind that addressing oppression was not only virtuous, righteous and just but also lucrative in terms of bureaucratic and academic advancement and state-funded grants, an oppression industry emerged. The brave new world of oppression management grew over the decades to include, *inter alia*: animals, victims of oppressive, usually male, white farmers; and the earth, whose metal ores found themselves the victim of brutal extraction by mining companies according to the academically fashionable discipline of post-human harm “theory”.

Academe and the bureaucracies devoted to measuring and improving the state of oppression have thus turned oppression and suffering into an assessable and evolving moral system devoted to emancipation. Adapting Pope’s *Moral Essay*, the OQ test reveals the otherwise impenetrable world of vilification thresholds and hate speech:

Search then the ruling oppression: there alone,
The Wild are constant and the Cunning known;
The Fool consistent, and the False sincere;
Priests, Princes, Women, no dissemblers here
The clue once found, unravels all the rest.

Unravelling the scale of oppression reveals who can speak and who should be silenced. In the kingdom of the oppressed, the one-eyed, black or Asian lesbian is queen, receiving +3 on the oppression quotient.

Clarifying the working of the quotient enables us to score the cases we identified above. Israel Folau does not meet the Gelber “threshold”, not because his remarks aren’t offensive enough but because he is an oppressed Australian from a Pacific Island background, giving him a score of +1. His critics are largely white, or white homosexuals. In the event of a score draw no action may be taken or sanction imposed. A similar scoring applies to Kanye West’s remark to his “appalled” interlocutor. This is also the case with radical feminists and their

transgender critics. Ironically, if the transgendered were not recognised as “victims”, they would otherwise be treated as men in drag beating up women and lose 1-0.

In the case of Yassmin Abdel-Magied, as a Sudanese-Australian Muslim female she scores an unimpeachable +3 on the oppression quotient and her white male critics zero. She will no doubt return to the fatal shore from her self-imposed London exile with an enhanced radical chic. Meanwhile, “powerful white male” Professor Lebow loses 1-0 and faces censure and expulsion from the International Studies Association.

It is perhaps surprising, but by no means inexplicable, that classic liberalism, which pioneered the idea of the free individual, should by a process of rational critique mutate into an ideology that inhibits free expression if it undermines progress, peace, harmony and the mitigation of suffering and self-pity.

Born with an Enlightenment contempt for tradition and a critical view of the present, the progressive mind has always sought and fought for causes. Unimpressed by the tolerant milieu that made it possible, modern liberalism restlessly pursues the emancipation of the oppressed, the more victimised and alienated from the prevailing secular order the better. As the oppression quotient demonstrates, such progressivism is beset by illusion: the illusion of rational harmony; the illusion of ultimate agreement if speech conditions are regulated; and most central of all, the idea “that will and desire can ultimately be sovereign in human affairs”, that things will ultimately pan out the way the progressive vision demands.

In its current soteriological mood it lumps together a heterogeneous collection of oppressions in a manner that tempts us to treat this similarity as the most crucial fact about them. To justify this moral imperative, liberals attribute to the oppressed a curious kind of moral innocence. As a consequence the self-pitying are set up as judges of behaviour in a way that ultimately unravels the practice of both politics and disinterested scholarship.

Associate Professor David Martin Jones is Reader in Political Science at the University of Queensland. A footnoted version of this article appears at [Quadrant Online](#).