

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

The Boundaries of Free Speech: Muslims, Catholics & Maori

The publication of the Mohammed cartoons and the screening of South Park's bleeding Madonna episode has again exposed how tenuous the right of free speech really is.

The conflict between the right to express an opinion that some may consider offensive, and the right to object to that opinion being expressed, erupted in violent protest from minority Muslim groups and passive protest from Catholics.

This raises two issues: how much liberty should an individual have to express an opinion that others may find offensive, objectionable, disagreeable or contrary; and the degree of force with which the aggrieved may respond.

The ever-moving boundary line of tension between these confronting forces helps to define what we would consider to be a "decent society".

The first part of this complex equation forms part of the wider debate about political correctness. Our guest commentator for the NZCPD Forum this week is the National Party's PC Eradicator, Dr Wayne Mapp (see www.nzcpd.com).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines political correctness as, "the avoidance of forms of expression or actions that exclude, marginalise or insult certain racial or cultural groups".

If the PC brigade had their way, they would say that the answer is to ban anything that even the most sensitive would consider offensive. They would have banned the publishing of the Danish cartoons because they may be offensive to Muslims, the screening of the South Park episode because it may be offensive to Catholics, along with anything that may be offensive to feminists, gays, Maori and so on.

This is the problem with political correctness and why so many people are so opposed to it: it has been captured and manipulated by those with political agendas

to be used as a defence against those who criticise or even question - their cause (none more so than radical Maori). They have taken the common expectation that individuals will refrain from being inappropriately offensive or use disrespectful language, and forged it into a shield of censorship against comment on their issues.

The PC brigade, are behind the Labour Party's plan to introduce "Hate Speech" legislation. Such legislation would ban people's right to discuss, propose or publish ideas that could be considered objectionable or offensive by others. While legislation to that effect has not yet been tabled, a Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into hate speech is still underway.

The Danish cartoons offended Muslims. The South Park episode offended Catholics. The difference between the two is in how they responded.

On the one hand fanatical Muslims orchestrated violent protests and issued death threats. There were riots, embassies were burned, people died, and the Danish cartoonists and their families, have gone into hiding after bounties were placed on their heads.

The Catholic Church called for peaceful protests and boycotts. On Wednesday night concerned Catholics protested outside TV3. Meanwhile some 220,000 tuned into C4 (compared to 30,000 normally). If they too found the subject matter offensive then they too would have exercised their free right to switch to another broadcaster.

Perhaps the difference between the protests lay in their motivations. By all accounts the Catholic protest appears to have been genuine in its motives. I am not sure if that can be said of the Muslims. In that case the protest action appears to have been captured by fanatical extremists who are quite prepared to use fear, violence and even death as weapons of intimidation to bring about obedience to their dictate.

Overseas, the Muslim protests crossed the boundary of decency into lawlessness. The Catholic

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protest didn't.

While New Zealand escaped violent protest action over the cartoon issue, we have certainly experienced such events in the past - the Springbok tour comes to mind. We are fortunate in that New Zealand is relatively free of extreme fanatics and our protests are relatively benign - except, that is, for the actions of a small group of radical Maori.

Maori activists freely use intimidation and threats of violence to gain racially based rights and privilege, money and power. As a result, our society is now more divided than it has ever been, providing progressively richer rewards and even parliamentary representation - based on race.

In fact, Hone Harawera, speaking for the Maori Party in the Parliamentary debate on the Prime Minister's Statement, ended his speech with these words: "Yesterday Tariana [Turia]'s message was of a strong and positive vision for our future, and we share that future with everyone. But mine is a warning that we will no longer stand aside and let other people cripple our future".

If the Muslim cartoon issue has taught us anything it is that we should stand up to radicals. We should not allow the extremist elements within our society to capture, through the political correctness agenda, the right to control the expression of ideas.

Generations before us have fought not only for the right of free speech but for intellectual freedom as

well. It is the challenging of beliefs and the competition of ideas that extend human virtue; that prevent us from becoming a society, in the worst-case scenario, servile to the wishes of a tyrant or a minority, who control our thoughts through the censorship of ideas.

As a diverse society respectful of the rights of others, we should be encouraging people who may be offended by something, to exercise their own free democratic right to choose not to read it, watch it or listen to it, and, if they feel really strongly about it, to march about it in the streets, but they should never demand the removal of someone else's right of expression.

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P.S. Courtesy of the Internet, for those who haven't seen the cartoons or watched South Park but would like to, the Danish cartoons can be seen at <http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/698> and South Park at <http://www.showbiz2day.com/>

Dr Muriel Newman is a director and founder of the NZCPD.

This week's poll is double barreled: *it asks firstly, whether you believe the Danish cartoons are offensive and should the New Zealand media have published them; and secondly, whether you watched South Park this week and if you did, whether you found it offensive?*

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