

How We Became Politically Correct

The idea that individuals may lose their way, is easy to grasp. It happens all the time. And we know that a lot of loners go loopy because they lack the mirror of humanity in which to see themselves reflected.

But the idea that whole nations can lose their way is as fascinating as it is disconcerting, and one of which we see more evidence daily. Individuals get their reality therapy - sometimes shock therapy - from others who kindly or roughly scold them for being lost in some self-blinding "enthusiasm" (as our predecessors called them).

A recent example struck home. Tensions were building between a known feminist and ... a male. And those of us watching the coming conflagration were getting very edgy. The male was asked for a character reference, so to speak, on another female. "She's a bitch," he said, knowing this would send up the feminist. True to form, she pierced him mercilessly with red-hot poker eyes, then shot back with her best rhetorical weaponry: "That's terrible! What would you call her if she were a man?"

We held our breath for the fireworks. And without missing a beat, and perhaps somewhat alarmed, he blurted out - "a son of a bitch."

Well, there was a spontaneous and delightful burst of laughter; real, hearty, belly laughter, from everyone present, and the laughter most enjoyable and enjoyed was from the feminist and the male, who were now bending over in stitches, momentarily beautiful and happy, because freed by spontaneous humour from a narrow frame of mind. Our whole society needs a shot of that.

But humour is only possible if we are still sane. Crazy people don't really laugh, for they have lost the corrective tension between the true and the absurd. For them, everything is absurd. Neither do whole nations laugh. And the fear is surely that whole nations, as we know, can sink into absurdity ... and think it normal.

There are little markers along the way. Recent events such as the "correctness" scandal at the University of British Columbia, in which an "outraged" woman spent a quarter million tax dollars to report that some professors have bad manners, and stories about the need for "volunteer community mediators" to solve disputes in schools and neighbourhoods, come to mind. Both cause reflection on a saying we will surely have increasing cause to ponder. Namely, that in a free society, "there can be no public good without private virtue."

If private virtue is anything it must be a proper sense of balance, or discernment, which is an inner thing having to do with self-control. With balancing the spiritual, rational, and physical

parts of our being. And if wildly expensive and silly correctness reports and yellow-shirted police-students in schoolyards indicate anything, it is a serious loss of this inner control. "The parents and teachers have failed," was one observation, "because adults without control and manners are just young people who never learned them."

Unfortunately, people who lose the ability to correct themselves, soon lose the confidence to correct others, such as their children, their students, or bad-mannered adults. Then we have to ask some legal agency, or volunteer mediator, to do the job. In essence, we take each other to behaviour court. And that's how an entire nation can sink into absurdity without knowing it.

Modern liberal society is vainly attempting to externalize controls that we should insist remain internal, by slipping the powers of surveillance and behaviour modification to external agents. Such desperate bureaucratic measures to enforce a frivolous notion of the public good are signs we have given up on private virtue.

The real danger, of course, is that we have brought this distinctly unhumorous regime upon ourselves as a consequence of deliberate political theory. For in the egalitarian kingdom of modern liberalism it is not nice to be good, or speak of goodness. For this implies someone else may not be good. That's why a regime of radical equality, as one insightful critic put it, will always produce "a legal disestablishment of morality," by getting rid of any good, better, best, standard of behaviour. Not tolerance, but neutrality then becomes the standard, lest some be hurt, or stigmatized.

This all seems part of a shift from the old notion of self-improvement (which required some standard against which to judge ourselves and others), to the modern, self-flattering notion of self-esteem (which is a silly notion, simply because esteem is something granted by others according to our actions, not according to our opinion of ourselves). It's also a shift from the idea of divine providence, to political providence (and thus, to more taxes).

To complete this politically providential circle, we call for more and better policies, pleasing ourselves with an illusion of the public good in compensation for weakened private virtue. This in turn requires abandoning and neutralizing the major moral issues, long since consigned to arbitration by the state and its charters (lest we offend whole groups in society), and venting our residual moral outrage on the little things that are left. Sound familiar?

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