

Free Speech Till it Hurts

by Francis Bennion

The Defence of Literature and the Arts Society is opposed to censorship. Where should it stand on the Issue of allowing free speech to fascist bodies like the National Front? Francis Bennion, a member of the DLAS executive committee, attempts an answer. Comments are welcome.

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, says the European Convention on Human Rights. That is what DLAS believes too. The Convention allows exceptions where these are necessary for various reasons. That is where danger creeps in. The exceptions can easily whittle away the principle, till there is virtually nothing left. That is what DLAS is fighting.

Those who seek to whittle away freedom of speech always have a plausible reason. The people they want to silence are nasty people; or the message they want suppressed is a nasty message. But nastiness is a matter of opinion, not a matter of fact. In a free society the citizens form their own opinions. They do not submit to having their minds made up for them by superior people who think they know best.

Last autumn, when the general election appeared imminent, a storm blew up about the fact that on the principles applying to allocation of party political broadcasts the National Front were entitled to one. When the election does take place (before you read this), the issue will rise again. Well-meaning people like the Anti-Nazi League will renew their demand that the rules should be bent to stop the NF getting the broadcast they are entitled to. If the rules are not so bent, they will try to persuade the technicians unlawfully to "pull the plug" so as to stop the broadcast going out.

Anyone who wants to pull the plug on National Front political broadcasts deserves our sympathy and understanding. His heart is in the right place, even though the emotions may be out of control. Clearly he harbours good intentions, but (as Lord Dufferin said when Viceroy of India) in public life there can be no allowance for good intentions. Undoubtedly compassionate, the plug-puller is also both arrogant and timorous. He distrusts his fellow citizens. Deep down, he distrusts freedom too. Democracy is for him a meaningless noise.

The plug-puller's timidity is understandable. Over his shoulder he sees the spectres of Hitler and Roehm. He fears that, given a 15-minute party political broadcast, Martin Webster and his unpleasant chums might take over London as the storm troopers took over Berlin. Old maids look under the bed; the plug-puller looks over his shoulder. Not seeing where he is going, he falls into a bottomless pit. We must not let him drag us all down with him.

The bottomless pit is the trap of letting broadcasting authorities decide which of the political parties should be granted air time and which should not. In a Sunday Times article last autumn, David Edgar argued that the NF are "beyond the democratic pale" because their ideology threatens the freedom of biologically-defined groups to exist. But what of an ideology that threatens democracy itself, such as that of the Socialist Workers' Party? Is that "beyond the democratic pale"? It is perfectly plain that once we allowed the BBC and the IBA the right to decide between political parties the case would be argued for excluding other parties beside the NF. In a democracy such decisions belong to Parliament alone.

A more dangerous trap still would be to allow the more militant members of the Anti-Nazi League to get away with doing the plug-pulling themselves. At least the broadcasting authorities have some degree of social accountability. The ANL has no more social accountability than the NF. To surrender to people so distrustful of their fellow-citizens would be to surrender to anarchy.

I do not distrust my fellow-citizens. I believe that in Britain we have a sufficient supply of robust common sense and firmness to stand no nonsense from neo-Nazis. But we will stand no nonsense from plugpullers either. We insist on judging for ourselves the National Front activists and their message.

I was profoundly grateful to the BBC for exposing the Front in one of the Tonight programmes. I saw for myself the crude, brash abrasiveness of their leader. I judged for myself the sort of people they attract to their hysterical, unhealthy meetings. I felt my own surge of anger at their obscene attitude to fellow human beings. I was taking orders from no one. My opinions formed themselves, having concrete evidence to go on. Many other viewers reacted in the same way no doubt.

Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, once said that if a nation had no crime it would have no freedom. That was a vivid way of expressing the obvious truth that "freedom" includes freedom to do bad things as well as good. Society, in self-protection, is forced to curtail the freedom to do wrong. It should do so to the minimum extent, and should insist that curtailment is effected only by its elected representatives after full debate. It is not for the self-elected to impose their view of what is right and wrong. As I once said to Peter Hain (a moving spirit behind the Anti-Nazi League): "If I am free, I am free to do what you do not like, as well as what you like; if I am free only to do what you like then I am not free". Peter Hain is an exponent of "direct action" against racism. This is the illegal and forcible imposi

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tion of its will by a minority faction. It disdains the parliamentary processes of a mature democracy. Instead, it unleashes the raw muscular power of idealistic youth.

Most people believe both in opposing racism and in preserving parliamentary democracy. Direct action campaigns pressurise them into apparently having to reject one of these causes in order to uphold the other. The more strongly the two beliefs are held, the more acute becomes the seeming dilemma. The real truth is that the fight against racism must be conducted wholeheartedly-but not by methods that alienate those who believe in the preservation of our democratic system and the rule of law.

The arrogance of Peter Hain and his fellow plugpullers lies in this. They have inspected the National Front, its leaders and supporters. After examining the evidence, they have reached the conclusion that these people are vicious, sick and contemptible. No doubt they are right. No doubt the vast majority of the British people, allowed to judge for themselves, would reach the same conclusion. But no individual or group has the right to pre-empt that conclusion. We must all be free to form our own judgment on such issues. We have fought many enemies to establish our right to do that.

My own view is that the British, who believe in giving a man enough rope to hang himself, will judge shrewdly whatever case the National Front may put up in their party political broadcast. The only peril to reaching that judgment is if self-appointed dictators of opinion try to tell the British public what to think. That might easily be counter-productive.

We insist on judging for ourselves. And at the end of the day we are likely to say of the National Front, in the words of the Arab proverb: The jackal barks, but the caravan passes. If you stop the jackal barking you give him a legitimate grievance. That we must not do. Free speech means nothing if it does not allow statements to be made that most of us would strongly disagree with.¹

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¹ *Uncensored* (Journal of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society), Winter 1979/80, p. 4.

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Any footnotes are shown at the bottom of each page
For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website

References:

None