



Cancelled! How ideological cleansing threatens Australia

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Analysis Paper 13

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Iconoclasm: the high price of purity

Statues of Captain James Cook, Captain James Sterling, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, and former prime ministers, John Howard and Tony Abbott, were among others vandalised by protesters around Australia in June 2020.

In the judgment of the vandals, each statue depicted a figure whose opinions or political views, or historical roles were deemed to dishonour or demean aspects of Australian identity — especially any that concerned Indigenous Australians. As such, statue-toppling protesters ruled that history had to be corrected and the stigma of colonialism and invasion eradicated. Statues in any way representing that history deserved to be defaced accordingly.¹

Greens staffer Xiaoran Shi was subsequently fined for defacing a statue of Cook in Sydney's Hyde Park. Following conviction, Shi faced stern criticism from magistrate Michael Allen at the sentencing hearing in July 2020. Allen compared Shi to a "guerilla in the night" and warned that in spray-painting the words, "sovereignty never ceded", together with the Aboriginal flag in black on the base of the statue, Shi was also deliberately fuelling long-standing racial tensions in Australia.²

Iconoclasm by defacing monuments and denouncing historical figures is one the practices characterising what has come to be known as 'cancel culture', which Noah Carl defines as:

The practice of pressuring an institution into sanctioning someone because others perceived that they were psychologically or emotionally harmed by something the individual said, or something he did a long time ago in history.³

These sanctions can extend to attacks on commercial brands taken to represent unsavoury or unacceptable aspects of Australia's colonial history. This occurred, for example, in June 2020 when the Western Australian brewery, Colonial Brewing, came under attack when the word 'colonial' was deemed unacceptable by self-appointed cultural critics. The company defended itself by emphasising that the word was used not to celebrate colonialism but because it was one of the first breweries in the wine-growing region of Margaret River. It made no difference: the company remained under significant pressure to change its brand.⁴

Three dangers

Cancel culture and accompanying campaigns, such as that being waged against Colonial Brewing, are intended to erase elements of history and, in Australia, deny the record of those who helped found this country. In effect, however, the impulse

to erase Australia's heritage and impose a revised, modern sensibility on the past serves only to undermine properly informed historical enquiry. But it also incubates other problems; for, as presaged in Magistrate Allen's warning, campaigns of cancellation confront Australia with three pressing dangers:

Danger No. 1: Corroding civility

Denying history and promoting ideas about the country that are intentionally divisive and mendaciously false — such as the claim that Australia remains an 'occupied country built on legal slavery' — will corrode the civility that binds our society, and undermine our sense of national identity.

Opinions remain sharply divided about important matters such as constitutional recognition of Australia's Indigenous people, and their treatment in the justice system. Yet reasoned discussion about ways to resolve these significant differences will only be made more difficult by inflamed and misleading rhetoric, and by aggressive actions likely to provoke aggressive responses.

Danger No. 2: Destroying trust

Corroding civility will lead to a decline of trust and the exacerbation of social division. Magistrate Allen warned that acts of cancellation are "deliberate, calculated, [and] attention-seeking" attempts to divide society by, for example, stoking fears about racism and racist behaviour. With trust destroyed, it will be much harder to hold in check social forces that heighten acute polarisation in our community. Engaging with those who hold opposing views will become almost impossible.

Danger No. 3: Fuelling discord

Destroying trust fuels discord as ideas and opinions are constrained by pressure to observe an intolerant orthodoxy. This constraint, imposed and patrolled zealously by the guardians of orthodoxy in both social and mainstream media, will eliminate any capacity to exercise reason, evaluate arguments, weigh evidence, and, therefore, to discern truth from falsehood. Truth will be determined solely by the tyranny of the mob.

This report makes clear that cancel culture confronts Australia with all three of these dangers today. Civility will be corroded; trust will be destroyed; and discord will be fuelled. The report also makes clear that these dangers arise from a zealous ideological cleansing characterised by the culture of cancellation that has combined, in recent months, with Black Lives Matter campaigning.

The cost of indifference

Black Lives Matter (BLM) began as protests against violent policing in the United States. Although BLM, together with the practice of cancellation, are imports to Australia, they have not yet generated the same intensity of outrage as witnessed in the USA. The dissimilarity can be explained, in part, by Australia's different history; it can also be explained by our very different culture, which does not share the ideological zeal for perfectionism so characteristic of US culture.

However, these dissimilarities must not be allowed to breed indifference to the real threats posed by these powerful campaigns of social upheaval. They are

rooted in the politics of identity, which holds that a person's identity is determined wholly by the group to which they belong or into which they were born.

As this report makes clear, individual freedoms — supplanted by the politics of identity feeding these campaigns of upheaval — are already being replaced by an oppressive fundamentalism that brooks neither dissent nor discussion. Opponents, like statues suddenly deemed offensive, will be torn down and discarded. The moral costs of indifference to the far-reaching social implications of these campaigns of upheaval will be high, and will be borne by Australians of all generations.

Down with Cook

The practice of toppling and defacing statues did not begin in Australia. Statues of those known — or believed to have been — involved in slavery or colonialism, or who held racist opinions, or who were deemed to have tolerated social injustices, or who waged war in ways considered today to be unethical, have in recent years been toppled with some regularity in England, Scotland, Belgium, and the United States.⁵

Statues of the vanquished have, of course, long since met a similar end. For example, a statue of Saddam Hussein standing in Baghdad's Firdos Square was famously torn down shortly after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003; and many statues of Lenin and Stalin fell from their pedestals, along with the Soviet regime, in 1991. In these and similar examples, statues representing tyranny are torn down when tyrants fall from power and people formerly held captive by the state suddenly enjoy freedom. Removal of such statues symbolised newly restored liberty and represented optimism about the future.

By contrast, today's topplers and vandals are motivated not by optimism about the future but by pessimism about the past. Any monument to any

deed or person that blights the history or supposed standing of a country — whether it is James Cook's cartographic exercises along Australia's eastern seaboard, Cecil Rhodes' imperial ventures in southern Africa, or the slave-trading activities of 17th century Bristol businessman and philanthropist, Edward Colston — must be torn down in atonement of evils of colonialism, racism, and slavery perpetrated in the past. Nothing can mitigate the historic 'crimes' perpetrated by such individuals.

Repentance for past errors is demanded, but the assurance of consequent absolution and forgiveness is withheld. If forgiveness for past errors can be obtained by the repentant, it is only by means of penitential acts of renunciation.

However, expressions of apology are only possible when uttered — or acted out — by the living for deeds perpetrated by the dead. The dead, obviously, cannot apologise for their own actions; but nor can the living seemingly ever adequately apologise for their own actions perpetrated in the course of their daily lives. Once done, deeds are neither forgotten nor forgiven. Apology, remorse, and contrition count for nothing. Conformity is ruthlessly coercive.⁶

Cancelled! The mob bays for ‘safety’

Coerced conformity to certain prevailing cultural norms — for example, those concerning identity as they bear on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity — has been sweeping university campuses for many years.

In itself, student activism is nothing new. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, students in many countries regularly campaigned against wars (such as those waged in Vietnam and Iraq), against injustice, and against authoritarian regimes (such as the apartheid regime which governed South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s). They were motivated in their determination to fight for what they were certain was a better and more peaceful world.

Today’s campaigners for what they call ‘social justice’ might appear to be motivated by a similar determination. But what is different today, as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt have observed, is that current student activists are motivated primarily by concerns for their own wellbeing rather than the wellbeing of others.

Students are not strong and confident; they are fragile and fearful: “Even those who are not fragile themselves often believe that *others* are in danger and therefore need protection” (*italics in original*).⁷ What they seek is not a world that is just but one that is safe. In their study of American university students and school children, Lukianoff and Haidt trace this unsettling development to excessively protective parenting. Protectiveness, they argue, soon leads from banning peanut butter in the school canteen to purging language of offensive ideas.⁸

The result is that the drive to ensure correct utterance in safe spaces and the eradication of offensive words

in the public square is rapidly displacing liberal commitments to freedom of speech. For these campus activists, freedom of speech is not a right; but something permissible only insofar as it conforms with conceptions of social justice regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

Thus, academics expressing unpopular ideas have been forced from their positions; visiting speakers whose presence on campus was deemed harmful have met with violent resistance and been driven away; and dangers detected in ever more places have bred a culture of ‘safetyism’ as the notion of ‘safety’, itself, underwent a process of ‘concept creep’.⁹

Although this form of mental pathology began on the university campus, it has now reached far beyond the ivory tower and has been embraced by corporations engaged in commerce, the media, and digital technology. As Peter Baldwin has observed, pithily: “There is a sense in which we are all ‘on campus’ now.”¹⁰

Practices of public shaming and calling out of those deemed unacceptable because of their controversial or unpopular, or simply *unacceptable* opinions deemed to threaten the wellbeing or safety of others, have been bundled together under the broad concept of ‘cancellation’ — a form of boycott that has, in turn, given rise to the term ‘cancel culture’. Support is withdrawn — or *cancelled* — and invariably coupled with denunciation and vilification when public figures, organisations, or corporations have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. This is exactly what happened to author J.K. Rowling. [See Box 1]

Box 1

Los Angeles, June 2020: J.K. Rowling, creator of ‘Harry Potter’ was attacked for her views about transgender identity. Her view was that gender was not determined by choice but by biology: “I refuse to bow down to a movement that I believe is doing demonstrable harm in seeking to erode ‘woman’ as a political and biological class and offering cover to predators like few before it,” Rowling had said.¹¹

Rowling, a generous philanthropist whose political views incline to the Left, has also made significant financial contributions to Britain’s Labour Party. But neither her Left-wing credentials nor her philanthropic generosity were enough to save her when she expressed her opinion about transgender. She was cancelled and roundly criticised by foes, abandoned by colleagues — including the Harry Potter actors whose fortunes she had made — and vilified by transgender activists.

Cancel culture has now moved far beyond the boundaries of the university. It now takes aim regularly at targets across Western societies with what the Editorial Board of the *Wall Street Journal* has described as:

The fervor and indiscriminate judgment of the revolutionary mind. The guillotine isn't in use, but the impulse is the same. The destruction of social goods like academic freedom and political pluralism is merely collateral damage if the goal is seen as just.¹²

Public shaming and humiliation intended by a cancellation boycott take place online, which enables cancel culture to have global reach.¹³ Therefore, cancellation is immediate, international, and invariably

irreversible; offering rewards of enhanced social status and moral virtue quickly and easily for the person calling for another to be cancelled.¹⁴

And those demanding the cancellation of others can quickly find themselves cancelled. After calling for the cancellation of Coon cheese — a brand named after the American who pioneered a cheese ripening process, Edward William Coon (see Box 3),¹⁵ Australian comedian Josh Thomas was himself embroiled in a racism row over quips he made about hiring non-white actors.

For critics of cancel culture, such as Roger Kimball, this shows up the activism for what it most surely is: "deploying the mob to replace freedom and opportunity with stultifying moral disapprobation."¹⁶

From grievance to outrage: Black Lives Matter

In December 2018, English comedian and broadcaster Michael Palin accepted an appointment as Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George. Some 18 months later, in July 2020, Palin declared that the image on the order's medal — depicting a light-skinned figure of St Michael standing on the neck of the vanquished dark-skinned figure of Satan — was racist. While not offering to return the award and forego his knighthood, Palin nonetheless called for the image to be redesigned.¹⁷

It is probably racism that attracts the most severe forms of moral disapprobation. It is now readily detected in all kinds of utterances, images, and expressions of opinion. Those determined to expose racism stop at nothing in their efforts to eradicate one point of view and install another in its place. Even images of mythical figures, such as mermaids and angels, are condemned for being racist.¹⁸

Yet the charge of racism, as it is used today, makes reference to a particular and unreliable view that *all* black people are oppressed by *all* white people — and always have been. White people have 'white privilege' which they use — even unconsciously — to oppress black people who must, in turn, harness their own 'black power' to overthrow oppression.

Oppression or violence meted out by black people against black people is not weighed; nor is oppression or violence meted out in Asian societies by Asian people against other Asians. Hence, the fight against 'racism', a term used exclusively to denounce behaviours and beliefs of white people directed at black people, is waged in pursuit of the declaration that Black Lives Matter (BLM).¹⁹

Little attention would have been paid to the particular depiction of conquest on Palin's medal had it not

been for the death of George Floyd in the United States on 25 May 2020. Floyd, a 46-year old black man, was apprehended in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, who subdued Floyd by placing his knee on the neck of the prostrate man for eight minutes. After five minutes, Floyd lost consciousness and was later pronounced dead. Chauvin was charged with second-degree manslaughter and second-degree murder. He and the accompanying officers were also dismissed from the police force.

Disturbing images of the arrest and asphyxiation of George Floyd beneath the knee of the police officer provoked violent protests across the United States, and later around the world. These protests condemned police brutality, police racism, and racism in general. They also served to reignite the BLM movement. Popular support among Americans for BLM protests following the death surged to 67 per cent, according to the Pew Research Center.²⁰

Floyd's death raised important questions about reform of policing methods and reminded governments of the need to preserve the essential compact between police and citizen in order for policing to be effective. However, questions about police brutality and the treatment of black prisoners, in particular, by judicial systems soon evolved into protests about something much wider — the very structures of a liberal democratic society.

Radical activists launched efforts in some American cities, such as Seattle, to subvert that society altogether and replace it with a revolutionary utopia 'liberated' from capitalism, ownership of property, any police presence — and, before long, law and order. [See Box 2]

BOX 2

Seattle, June 2020: Activists, protesting the death of George Floyd whilst being arrested by Minneapolis police, seized six blocks of the North American city in the neighbourhood of Capitol Hill and declared the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone — CHAZ, for short. When police withdrew from the precinct, as demanded by the CHAZ occupiers and ordered by Seattle's mayor, Jenny Durkan, crime soon spiked leading to the death of a 19-year old man.²¹

No police; no peace. It seems obvious. Yet the CHAZ occupiers — comprising activists in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, the anti-capitalist Occupy movement, and an assortment of militants from the revolutionary Antifa Left — insisted that far from being essential to prevention of crime and protection of the community, any police presence was actually an incitement to violence and social unrest.

By the time CHAZ was cleared by police at the beginning of July, however, after 24 days, there had been a total of two gun homicides and another four victims of shootings. The CHAZ homicide rate ended up being 1,216 per 100,000 — nearly 50 times greater than the rate in Chicago — because police had been unable to patrol the area upholding law and order.²²

Freedoms that underlie the social compact that makes civil society possible were soon threatened. Those who questioned the objectives of BLM, or who sought to extend the value of lives to *all* human lives, or who questioned the extent of supposed 'institutional' racism were denounced. Forced not only to withdraw their remarks, many were also forced from their jobs; such as Californian sports broadcaster, Grant Napear, who tweeted his opinion that "All Lives Matter".²³ And all for having stated a fundamental principle of human morality that *all* lives *do* matter.

No longer simply concerned with addressing injustices perpetrated by police, the porous ideological boundaries of BLM soon absorbed a wider disdain for liberty, civility, and Western civilisation. Dubbing these wider protests as "America's Jacobin moment", the Editorial Board of the *Wall Street Journal* described them as: "a ferocious campaign of political conformity sweeping across American artistic, educational, business and entertainment institutions."²⁴ No longer content with addressing policing policies, BLM was criticised by some commentators as nothing less than an assault on the foundations of the West.²⁵

Cancel culture and BLM: a war of all against all

Black Lives Matter emerged as a protest against perceived injustices suffered by black people at the hands of white institutions. As its attention moved beyond reform of policing practices, however, BLM — a decentralised and loosely affiliated collection of protest groups — began to direct its fury towards *all* institutions of the state

Cancel culture emerged in response to students' imagined fragility and fear of harm. However, no longer merely seeking protection of the fragile on campus, advocates of cancellation sought the eradication of *anything* deemed to cause distress, offence, or to provoke disturbing memories.

Quite distinct at the outset, the scope of each movement grew and the objectives of each developed in disconcerting ways. Their respective objectives rapidly conflated; each has tainted the other with its own ugliness and menace as they have metastasised into the wider culture. Outrage directed at one instance of injustice, such as the unlawful

killing of George Floyd (for which the four police officers involved are to be prosecuted and face legal sanctions), soon sought out other manifestations, whether real or confected, of unjust oppression. As Roger Kimball has observed:

Casual, seemingly isolated attacks on the fabric of civilization feel at first like so many insect bites. A speaker is shouted down. A statue is vandalized or removed. Political posturing is everywhere. Grievances blur and lose their specificity. Every slight becomes a pretext for boundless rage.²⁶

Attacking 'oppression' in the name of defending 'victims' leads to a strictly Manichean view of the world in which one group is irreproachably virtuous and the other is irredeemably bad. Individual freedoms have been supplanted by the politics of identity, which demands complete and unwavering loyalty to causes advocated by the group; usually in the name of 'defeating oppression and privilege'.

Thus, people are no longer identified as individuals but rather classified in binary opposition: black or white; Palestinian or Jew; LGBTI+ or straight; slave or free; conquered or imperialist, colonised or coloniser. Sometimes, this bifurcated view of the world is based on ignorance; but not always, as Melanie Phillips has remarked:

There is a large mass of people, mostly young, who are constantly seeking a focus for their idealism. They have accordingly alighted upon one cause after another which claims to be about the betterment of the world — women, race, gender, the Palestinians, save the planet. But, in fact, these causes are all about hating other people: men, Zionists, white people, and humanity in general.²⁷

However, far from liberating people, the politics of identity itself imposes an oppressive fundamentalism that sets new forms of privilege to be now determined by skin colour, gender identity, and sexual orientation.²⁸ This sustained assault on established forms of human society bears the marks of nothing less than a cultural revolution; and, as Peter Baldwin has noted, it is a revolution that threatens to invert, and even destroy, the bonds of civility and custom:

We see mob hysteria in the physical and online space, and ritual denunciations of anyone expressing the slightest disagreement with the ever-changing orthodoxies of the identity politics creed. People are pressured into making apologies and acknowledging 'privilege'.²⁹

A yearning for cultural and societal purity stands behind efforts to erase history and destroy the past in the hope of building a utopian future. But detection and denunciation of past error only fuel further efforts to root out yet more cultural and historical sin in the pursuit of purity. It is never possible to do enough: enough is *never* enough.

Movements and organisations that declare themselves committed to rooting out racism or imperialism or homophobia or transphobia never attain their objectives and put down their weapons. They need their causes and campaigns to justify their continued existence. The pursuit of purity is never complete. In speaking about what he describes as this "so far bloodless revolution", British sociologist Frank Furedi has observed:

Censorship by powerful cultural organisations is just one symptom of what is fast becoming an institutionalisation of intolerance. [These organisations] appear hostile to the expression of a diversity of viewpoints; there is only one version of events.³⁰

Furedi is correct, although he understates the seriousness of the problem: there is not just an appearance of hostility to diverse opinion; these organisations and movements really *are* hostile to any divergent point of view. A dissenting viewpoint is to be denounced; it is never to be tolerated.

Woke and the occlusion of truth

"Ages are no more infallible than individuals," declared the 19th century philosopher and public intellectual, John Stuart Mill, "every age having held opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd; and it is certain that many opinions, now in general, will be rejected by future ages."³¹

For Mill, unrestricted freedom of opinion and expression was the vital precondition for individual self-development because truth depended on knowledge; and knowledge was most likely to emerge when opinions collided through the free expression and exchange of ideas.

Although appeal is frequently made to Mill today when freedom of speech is being defended, Mill, himself, did not view that freedom as a *right*, as such. Mill's concern was with overturning falsity and absurdity. The central concern of his most famous book, *On*

Liberty, was not constraints imposed by the state on the individual; it was *any* set of social conditions and constraints that militated against the development of truth and knowledge.

However, today's young Australians are among the new generation that has graduated from university and started careers armed with the conviction that progress does not develop with the free exchange of ideas.

No longer promoted by defeating falsity and absurdity in open debate, today's preferred strategy for developing knowledge is cancellation, one of a number of practices bundled together under the term 'woke'. Progress is now promoted by silencing unwelcome voices, deleting unwelcome ideas, and even by eradicating undesirable brand names. [See Box 3]

BOX 3

Darwin, July 2020: Indigenous rights activist, Stephen Hagan, claimed victory in his long-running battle to have Coon cheese renamed. Even though the cheese was named after the American cheese maker, Edward William Coon — who patented the ripening process involved in its manufacture in 1926 — and had been on sale in Australia since 1935, Hagan insisted the name had racist connotations. In 2008, Hagan had said that if the brand's owners could prove that the cheese had been named after E.W. Coon, he would drop his campaign. However, none of the evidence produced satisfied Hagan.³²

Finally, at the end of a campaign Hagan had begun in 1999, the Canadian owner of the brand, Saputo, conceded defeat after what it described as "a careful and diligent review of this sensitive situation."³³ But Hagan's victory, which at first then prompted him to take on Pauls dairy company over the name of its Smarter White Milk brand, met a sceptical response from other indigenous leaders, such as Jacinta Price. "Indigenous Australians have far greater issues to be concerned with than the name of a brand of cheese named after its founder or what's written on a carton of milk — [such as] addressing family violence and sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities," said Price.³⁴

Woke is not particularly new and has been around since the early 1940s. An official in the United Mine Workers in the United States, who was quoted by a journalist, used the word to indicate the pursuit of social justice: "Waking up is a damn sight harder than going to sleep, but we'll stay woke up longer."³⁵

Today, however, 'woke' signifies more than simply a desire for equality between people from all backgrounds, or a commitment to end discrimination on the grounds of skin colour or gender. Woke is not just the goal; it is the means of pursuing it.

Are you woke, Australia?

Protesters did take to the streets of some Australian cities in late June and July 2020, angry about Aboriginal deaths in police custody, the plight of refugees, and the status of Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank. But to Australians, continuing to come to terms with the challenge of rebuilding prosperity after the covid pandemic, the BLM movement and its associated protests often seemed more of a distraction than anything else.

Nonetheless, as noted above, woke campaign strategies of cancellation and eradication in Australia threaten to promote ideas about the country that are intentionally divisive and mendaciously false. One such falsehood is the claim that Australia is a country built on legal slavery.³⁶

The history of Australia's settlement is extremely contentious; but however it is interpreted, slavery — whether legal or illegal — certainly has no part to play in contemporary Australian society. Forms of slavery do, of course, persist in many parts of the world, including the United Kingdom.³⁷ Energy devoted to tearing down statues and memorials of people associated with slavery in previous centuries might better be directed at combatting contemporary slavery.

However, enthusiastic about condemning the past, woke campaigners appear to have little optimism about, or interest in, the possibility of overturning modern slavery. They are equally resolved in their views about a number of other contemporary vexatious issues about which opinion is settled — and needs to remain so. Three of the most prominent issues are racism, anti-Zionism, and Indigenous Australians.

Racism

Campaigns against racism in Australia are no longer concerned primarily with eradicating discriminatory behaviour directed at people on the basis of skin colour. Indeed, if such behaviour was the sole basis of accusations of racism, few accusations would succeed in a country which is one of the world's most successful multicultural societies — and to which large numbers of people from different cultures around the world continue to want to migrate.

Although there are undeniably some small numbers of people in Australia who are racists — as there are undeniably in other countries — there is little evidence the country is blighted by forms of systemic racism. For example, the 2019 *Mapping Social Cohesion*

report published by the Scanlon Foundation Research institute found that 85 per cent of those surveyed agreed that “multiculturalism has been good for Australia.”³⁸ Agreement has been consistent since 2013 when the survey began to ask a question about multiculturalism.

Even in the face of such consistency and a widespread acceptance of multiculturalism, some critics insist that racism persists in Australia. Instead of being based on skin colour, however, racism is now defined in terms of cultural compatibility with ‘national identity’ or a ‘mainstream way of life’:

Race is now the quality that marks supposedly abhorrent cultural differences. The new racism builds on physical features such as skin colour a set of negative stereotypes based on perceived cultural traits. Culture has come to be conceived as a fixed property of ethnic or religious groups.³⁹

This is a form of racism that has been redefined as “cultural racism” — despite the obvious fact that national identity and a way of life are, themselves, concepts shaped by the multicultural cultural character of Australian society.

Anti-Zionism

Charges of racism from the woke Left lead, inevitably, to charges that the Jewish State of Israel is not only motivated by racism in its political dealings with the Palestinians but that it traffics this racism abroad. For example, soon after the death of George Floyd, BLM activists peddled the antisemitic myth that the rogue Minnesota police officers had been trained in torture tactics by Israel.⁴⁰

Criticism of Israel is, of course, legitimate; but when protests about actions of the Israeli government evolve into protests against the right of the State of Israel to exist, a line is crossed between the tolerable discourse of criticism and the intolerable discourse of antisemitism.⁴¹ Yet antagonists promoting a culture of cancellation regularly cross this line when, for example, they advocate for boycotts against Israeli universities and the severance of ties with Israeli academics, or against commercial, non-political dealings with Israel.⁴²

These boycotts are invariably connected directly to the achievement of the drive for nationalism advanced by Palestinian authorities; and they are frequently associated with other, apparently unrelated, social campaigns. Indeed, as observed by Ted Lapkin, executive director of the Australian Jewish Association, “BLM has aligned itself with a political movement [Palestinian nationalism] that denies the right of Jewish national self-determination and seeks Israel’s eradication.”⁴³

Seldom is any protest raised against the terrorist actions of Hamas, the governing authority in Gaza, or against brutal treatment meted out to Palestinian people, themselves, by the Palestinian Authority that governs large sections of the West Bank. And those who do raise such concerns in an attempt to strike a reasoned balance in the argument, whether in Australia or elsewhere, are likely to find themselves the subject of swift cancellation decrees and denunciations.⁴⁴

Indigenous Australians

BLM protests in the United States in June quickly attracted protesters in Australia to statues commemorating Captain James Cook. They were drawing attention to the plight of Indigenous Australians, especially those who died in custody or who were mistreated by police. As *The Economist* observed, “the whole messy issue of Australia’s past rose up and wound itself in knots around Cook’s bronze form.”⁴⁵

It is, indeed, a messy issue that is easily oversimplified. Police violence is the cause of some Aboriginal deaths, but not all. Research conducted by the Institute of Criminology in 2017-18 found that the death rates of Indigenous prisoners per 100 was actually lower than that for non-Indigenous prisoners (0.14 per 100 and 0.18 per 100 respectively. As journalist Paul Kelly remarked of the Institute’s findings:

The data shows Aboriginal people die too often because they are in custody and prison too much, not because of murderous treatment in custody and prison compared with the non-Indigenous population.⁴⁶

The issue of Aboriginal deaths provokes bitter controversy, especially when critics, such as Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, a Warlpiri woman and Alice Springs Town Councillor, (and my CIS colleague), intervene. Price has objected to the BLM narrative and pointed out that more Aboriginal people die outside police custody than within it; and that the majority of Aboriginal deaths are caused by other Aboriginal people. “It is not racism that is sexually abusing our kids and it is not racism that is killing our people,” Price has remarked. “It’s the actions of our own people.”⁴⁷

But critics such as Price, even though deeply informed about the problems confronting Indigenous Australians, are bitterly denounced by those she has called “ignorant narcissists” for having presumed to call into question the motives and purposes of BLM protesters.⁴⁸ Yet for Price even to express such a view invites the likelihood — and the actual experience — of cancellation and denunciation.

The illiberal pursuit of justice

Fighting injustice and oppression is worthy and important. Many who have taken up the cause of BLM, or who have added their voices to calls for cancellation, have done so because they sincerely believe in the value of the objectives being pursued.

Notwithstanding a widespread change in social *mores* over the past 40 or 50 years — both driven and underpinned, in part, by legislative reform — discrimination against people on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and now gender, does persist; however, it is now neither socially nor culturally acceptable in most Western societies.

One notable consequence of this development is that restrictions on speech considered unacceptable in the 1960s and 1970s are now deemed essential. Such restrictions are thought necessary for upholding the dignity of those, such as transgender people, whose experiences are already marginalised. Without such restrictions, the vulnerable could be exposed to discriminatory behaviour.

Similarly, despair at the perceived plight of black people, particularly in the justice system, continues to add force to calls for reform of policing, sentencing, and imprisonment; even though discrimination against people on the grounds of race has been illegal in countries such as Australia for over 40 years.

In Australia, there are many such issues currently vexing those claiming to oppose oppression and propel progress; these issues include homophobia, transphobia, constitutional recognition, republicanism, and asylum seekers. None of the differences arising from these issues is easily resolvable; each arouses strong emotional responses in those who advocate the causes.

However, one challenge presented by the largely beneficial and widespread cultural unwillingness to tolerate discriminatory behaviour is that it can be perilous to question the tactics or motives of those who claim to be pursuing 'justice'. When such questions are posed — and the motives of those posing them impugned, or the proponents, themselves, subjected to vilification — debate becomes difficult, if not impossible. Counter-arguments, when advanced, are often rejected immediately and vociferously, and condemned without debate or discussion.

Fear of being condemned as racist, sexist, transphobic, or homophobic imposes a check on many who might otherwise question or contest societal and cultural trends. Threats of boycott mounted in social media campaigns, for example, are often used to impose and enforce standards of conduct on businesses and other commercial entities; those who

step out of line are liable to immediate exposure and humiliation. It is hardly surprising that widespread corporate support for same-sex marriage was secured so effectively.⁴⁹

However, reluctance to speak out against contemporary social campaigns for fear of condemnation does mean that the motives and tactics employed by movements such as BLM remain largely unexamined. Nearly 60 years after opposition to discrimination became a powerful political force, the discourse about issues such as racism has moved on from questions of skin colour to questions about power. This development has been heavily influenced by 'critical race theory', which first emerged in the American academy in the 1970s.

Initially concerned with improving the material conditions of black Americans, critical race theory has since spread beyond the academy to the classroom, the board room and the news room, bringing with it concepts such as 'unconscious bias', 'white privilege', and 'moral clarity'. It has also fostered growing contempt for approaches taken by classical liberalism to bring about social and moral change which are seen as failing to address systemic imbalance of power. Critical race theory has become widely attractive to activists because of its confident prescriptions for fighting injustice.

However, the danger is that these prescriptions can be both illiberal, and even revolutionary.⁵⁰ For example, arguments that 'institutional power' is exercised by white people lead to claims that the privilege white people are alleged to exert is perpetuated by civil institutions, such as the rule of law, which are not considered bastions of freedom but instruments of control.

Capitalism, itself, is also judged to embody institutional privilege and so it, too, must be challenged and overthrown. This revolutionary zeal, provided with an intellectual framework by critical race theory, entails that the fight for justice for black people demands a determination to dismantle all structures deemed to harm black people — even the nation state, itself. Thus, BLM has been criticised by some commentators, such as D.M. Jones and M.L.R. Smith, as nothing less than an assault on the foundations of the West: the iconoclasm of BLM, they argue, is fuelled by "rage rather than reason."⁵¹

BLM, together with cancel culture and its associated manifestations, has therefore fostered a new, dogmatic, and dangerous orthodoxy on our society. This orthodoxy imposes heavy and immediate penalties on any who dare to express dissent. At the same time, imposition of such an orthodoxy threatens to rend the fabric of social cohesion and to corrupt established forms of human social life.

The new orthodoxy takes aim at characteristic features of society such as attachment, rivalry, competition, and domination. But, as the late political scientist Kenneth Minogue argues, such characteristics, are nothing less than the realities of human society:

The worm of domination lies at the heart of what it is to be human, and the conclusion faces us that the attempt to overthrow domination is the attempt to overthrow humanity.⁵²

Classical liberal efforts to resist these revolutionary forces must not be directed at abolishing or removing power. Rather, as Roger Scruton has argued, it must be to mitigate the exercise of power, to argue forcefully for a shared conception of justice, and to ensure conflicts are resolved according to the standards of that shared conception.⁵³ However, formulating the objective is one thing; working out the practicalities of attaining it is another.

Conclusion: don't let cancel culture cancel Australia

How is this to be done? In an open and liberal society, complex moral, cultural, political, and social issues do need to be aired and debated even when consensus is elusive. The problem is that if contrary points of view cannot be canvassed — even when substantiated by compelling evidence — neither can falsehood readily be corrected. As *The Economist* has remarked, noting the virtues of classical liberalism:

Liberalism believes in progress through argument and debate, in which reason and empathy lift truthful ideas and marginalise bigotry and falsehood. It thrives on a marketplace of ideas, so diversity has a vital role. New voices and experience enrich the debate. It uses facts and evidence, tested in debate, to help the weak take on the strong.⁵⁴

However, as the shouting down of opponents gets louder, misleading views about a range of key issues are soon distorted by unchallenged error and misconception. And therein lies the harm: as fallibility gives way to convictions of infallibility, promotion of division and civic discord threatens to disturb social cohesion; thereby allowing bigotry and falsehood to reign.

Australia is a very different country from either the United States or the United Kingdom, and the foundations of our national life are different from theirs. But this does not mean Australians can be complacent about the dangers posed by the movements of social unrest that peppered the world as anger about perceived sins of racism, white privilege, police brutality, homophobia, transphobia, slavery, colonialism, and oppression of black people — to mention only a few — boiled over in the first half of 2020.

No nation, including Australia, is able to claim that its history is pure; nor is there any nation whose history is not blighted by ignorance, cruelty, or misuse of power. But cancel culture zealotry is propagating an ignorance of history, a rejection of critical, reasoned thinking, and the ideal of a highly-polarised society that sets group against group. Hence, the importance of education, as noted by Simon Heffer in a recent essay written for the Centre for Independent Studies:

An ideal education should teach people *how* to think, not *what* to think. Deciding what to think can only be properly achieved after listening to and participating in debate and weighing up the options. If a debate is forbidden, and no-one is permitted to express a contrary, heterodox view, people will remain in a condition where they can only be told what to do, not decide it for themselves. [Italics in original]⁵⁵

Preoccupied as it is with language, symbols, and repentance, cancel culture threatens to divide rather than unite, and to tear down rather than build up. By imposing ever more stringent tests of conformity and ideological purity, the cancellers are debasing the civic principles upon which this society — and every liberal one — grows and flourishes. In their efforts to erase history, some critics of the movement have warned, that the cancellers are pursuing “the creation of a society without any shared civic morality, based on discord and hatred.”⁵⁶

Like all modern societies, Australia has to understand, interpret, and learn from its history; addressing historic injustices when it can, but never denying errors and misdemeanours that were perpetrated, often wilfully but sometimes in ignorance, in its past. All contemporary Australians must come to terms with

our history rather than pretend it does not exist and attempt to erase it by acts of cancellation.

But in doing so, we must be sure to protect our country, our communities, and our citizens from the three dangers posed by cancel culture — the corrosion of civility; the destruction of trust; and the fuelling of discord — which will be the scourge of everything we value about our nation.

The challenge facing Australians now is to confront these three dangers. They may seem trivial as ‘insect bites’ today, but their cumulative impact will be to undermine our way of life and to tear at the social fabric of our nation.

The dangers posed by cancel culture must be taken seriously. Failure to do so will only compound the civilisational harm being visited upon us in the name of progress and purity.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Simon Cowan, Glenn Fahey, Rob Forsyth, Blaise Joseph, and Monica Wilkie for their comments on an earlier draft of this report. Karla Pincott edited the manuscript and Ryan Acosta laid out the text for publication. All remaining errors are my own.

Related Works

Simon Heffer, *Moral Terrorism* (CIS Occasional Papers 174, July 2020)

Jeremy Sammut, *University Freedom Charters: How best to protect free speech on Australian campuses* (CIS Policy Paper 10, October 2018)

Frank Furedi, Marguerite Johnson, and Steven Schwartz, *What's happened to the University?* (CIS Occasional Papers 163, February 2018)



Analysis Paper 13 (AP13) • ISSN: 2209-3753 (Online) 2209-3745 (Print) • ISBN: 978-1-925744-62-0

Published August 2020 by the Centre for Independent Studies Limited. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisors, directors or officers.

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