

# The right to be offensive

Since the start of term student bodies and college authorities across the country have clamped down on political activities and censored political attitudes deemed to be 'offensive'. They have banned sales of left-wing newspapers, vetted posters and disaffiliated societies whose views they do not like.

- At Queen Mary and Westfield College in east London, the student union has refused funding for political societies. It has insisted that all posters and leaflets must first be vetted by union officials. Meanwhile the college authorities have tried to ban several meetings on race, on the grounds that they might provoke trouble, and insisted that student societies pay security costs for such meetings.

- At Goldsmiths College, in south London, posters advertising a Revolutionary Communist Students' meeting called 'How to be anti-British' were banned after the student union declared that they were 'inciting racial hatred'.

- At Birmingham University, the student union has set up a police force to patrol student residences and bar any left-wing paper sellers from the premises on the grounds that students should not be 'disturbed'.

- In Leeds University the student union has banned paper sellers from union premises on the grounds that such papers are 'offensive'.

The basic message in all these cases is that students are incapable of thinking for themselves and cannot be trusted to look after their own interests. They are such weak, sensitive creatures that they are likely to be offended by political newspapers or posters. The student union or college authorities have therefore to take it upon themselves to protect students from unwanted political advances.

In the past such actions would have been seen for what they are—political censorship—and created outrage and opposition. Today many students accept the meddlesome behaviour of the student unions and college authorities as necessary and legitimate.

The authorities have presented their actions not as curtailment of our freedoms, but as protection of our rights. This reflects a broader trend in society, where the authorities have increasingly taken it upon themselves to protect us from the perils of the outside world. The government censors what we can watch on TV under the pretext of protecting us from too much

depraving sex and violence. It dictates where we can assemble, march or meet on the grounds of protecting public order. It determines the behaviour of parents under the guise of protecting the rights of children. The result is a new culture of control where what we read, watch or do is determined for us. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the colleges.

The responsibility for allowing this to happen lies squarely with the left. In recent years left-wing groups have sought to defend our rights not through fighting to extend our freedoms, but through looking to the authorities to protect us. Anti-racists have called for greater policing and more repressive laws to stop racist attacks. Feminists have called for stricter legal controls over the behaviour of men. Everyone has called for the censorship of offensive language, the banning of offensive groups. The result has been to give the authorities the ability to control our lives in the guise of liberal concern for our rights.

Our response should be to reject the idea that our rights can be protected by curtailing our freedoms. We must expose the actions of the authorities for what they are: censorship, repression and plain meddling in our lives.

We must make clear that we, and only we, should decide what is suitable for us to read, watch or hear. Students are not little children. We do not need anyone else to make our mind up for us. Nor are we so weak and feeble that we will be mortally offended by a left-wing paper or an offensive poster. We are quite capable of making up our own minds about how we wish to lead our lives.

Finally, we must defend the right to be offensive. When student unions or college authorities object to people being 'offensive' what they are really objecting to is people being provocative, challenging and different. The authorities would like us all to keep our heads down, accept things as they are and sweep our problems under the carpet. But that is not good enough for us.

The question we should ask is this. What is more offensive: an anti-racist poster or the racial violence that we see all around us? Left-wing newspapers or mass unemployment and growing poverty? A provocative public meeting against intervention in Somalia or growing Western militarism?

Being offensive is necessary to raise issues that are real problems in society and to work out ways of dealing with them. That means fighting against all forms of censorship and fighting for the right of all students to say or do what they like.

## the perils of political correctness

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