**Freedom of Speech or Freedom to Denigrate?**

Inevitably the Andrew Bolt court case being played out in a Melbourne courtroom has stirred the proponents of ‘freedom of speech’ from their slumbers. Led by journalists and media organisations, ie. those with the greatest conflict of interest, they have mounted a major campaign to deflect attention from the real issues of racial vilification that are at the heart of the Bolt case. It matters not that most of these free speech advocates wouldn’t normally be seen dead in the company of Andrew Bolt. They invoke the old mantra, ‘I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it’. Their proclaimed distaste of Andrew Bolt’s views has never in the past prompted them to rush into print to challenge his views, but when someone else does decide to challenge Bolt’s diatribes the ‘free speech’ crew are suddenly visible and voluble.

Their claim to value freedom of speech would be more credible if they ever used that alleged freedom to challenge the often outrageous views of Bolt, or to address some of the issues of racism and inequity that are blatantly obvious in every part of Australia. For example when was the last time you ever heard a senior Australian journalist challenge Bolt’s views on anything other than climate change? Instead, the publicly owned ABC provides a forum for Bolt to inflict his views upon us every Sunday morning on the aptly named “Insiders” program, where Barrie Cassidy is obviously under instructions to give him free rein. Furthermore, I note that Channel Ten with immaculate timing has announced that Bolt has been offered his own show. What does that say to Aboriginal Australians and others offended by Bolt’s Demagoguery? Good one, Gina Reinhart and Lachlan Murdoch (major shareholders of Channel 10 and two of Australia’s richest people)!

Freedom of speech to me means the opportunity to speak out against the status quo and question the integrity of politicians, governments and media who lie to us on a daily basis.

But how often do we see these free speech advocates among journalists and mainstream media organisations challenge the status quo of the dominant white racist culture of Australia? Isn’t what we see more in the way of a carefully contrived silence on issues such as the appalling imprisonment rate of Aboriginal people in Australia, the UN criticised Northern Territory Intervention, the outrageous injustice of the police murder on Palm Island, the failure of the criminal justice system to deal with murders of Aboriginal people in Bowraville, Borroloola and Western Australia. When they are not silent on such issues the mainstream media are likely to adopt an anti-Aboriginal position, or a form of apologist denialism not too different from Andrew Bolt’s views on Aboriginal Australia. This is not just a problem of the more rabidly racist right-wing segment of the Australia media, but also among publications and other media that might otherwise regard themselves as ‘progressive’ or ‘soft-left’ media, such as the Monthly Magazine, ABC Current Affairs and Crikey.com. These pseudo-progressive outlets constantly bombard us with the unrepresentative views of the new-right ‘intelligensia’ of Black Australia, namely Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Warren Mundine, whilst at the same time the right-wing Murdoch media inflicts upon us the views and opinion of the self-same triumvirate. No other Aboriginal voices are permitted.

So, if both ends and everything in between on the political spectrum of Australian media adopt a generally anti-Aboriginal position on all matters pertaining to Aboriginal issues, and seemingly conspire to ignore and/or exclude Aboriginal issues and voices, then of what worth is their beloved ‘freedom of speech’? I believe it then amounts to ‘freedom to vilify’ rather than ‘freedom of speech’, and that seems to me to be what the free speech crew are essentially arguing for whether they realise it or not.

Of equal concern is that their spirited defence of their colleague Mr Bolt will ensure that even if he loses the court case, he will win in the sense that he then becomes a martyr to the cause of freedom of speech and will thereby gain much more mileage and support for his nonsensical views than ever before. Thus Andrew Bolt will have his personal freedom of speech enhanced and magnified, whilst the serious issues related to Aboriginal oppression in Australia will be successfully yet again safely under the carpet.

If that is ultimately what the freedom of speech argument amounts to, then I say let’s strengthen the laws against racial vilification and not go down the path that Germany did in the 1930s. The day that Australian journalists and mainstream media are capable of using freedom of speech to enhance society rather than use it to be complicit in society’s division, then I will support it.

But somehow I don’t think it will be in the near future.

**Gary Foley** 13th April 2011