

Censorship, Liberty, and Truth

Afternoon Speech – 55 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario

A sentiment exists among our leaders today that citizens are children and need to be protected. The belief has spread with viral depth. It has persisted with religious tenacity, and the state is at fault. The state is at fault with its paternalistic zeal, with its judicious abandon, and thus we find ourselves beneath its dark umbrella. We are shielded by an effort meant once to avert our eyes from the shadows on the wall, but which now has blocked the sun. No censorship that is unintended to preclude a form of violence or to stem egregious consequence should ever exist at all—lest ignorance over truth prevail.

The people of our nation are brave and determined. Our citizens in decades past are the men and women who pressed westward against a violent wilderness, who fought for independence against an oppressive rule, who died in the battlefields to maintain our way of life, and who today defend our streets, fight our fires, patrol our prisons, educate our children, and defend our borders. We are police and firefighters, social workers, judges, teachers, and citizens of an imperfect world. Our children should know it too—children who go to school in climates of bullying and sexualisation, sometimes of violence, sometimes of neglect. Citizens—all citizens—are likely to see the best and worst of the world. They should; it is part of the human experience.

Yet somehow, somewhere along the way, a government that can barely manage its own affairs sought to manage ours. Our leaders decided that the teenage girl who goes to school amid incidents of sex and pregnancy must not hear about them on TV, must not see them in advertisements—at least not in any real detail, at least not in any real way. Our leaders have declared that it is wrong for the young boy to hear vulgarity on television—as if somehow strings of syllables can inherently be harmful—and they have presumed, with a naïveté worse than that which they strive to defend, that children will not otherwise hear the same words anyway. What is worst of all, however, is that they preclude from all people the right to make the decision for themselves. They disallow parents from making the choice whether or not their children can see nudity or hear a swear word. And they ignore the capacity of adults simply to turn away—if they too subscribe to the childish notion that words and pictures can really cause us harm.

The defenders of censorship have willed us to live in the dark, to feel like infants in need of their guard, and some of us have believed them. Yet whatever comfort there is to gain in accepting a list of things we cannot say, of obeying proscriptions of things we must not do, has no consequence against the weight of liberty and truth that must be forgone to afford it. The world cannot be perfect; that is the beauty of the human endeavour. And censorship is to pretend like it already is. Because censorship is to hide the vices of the world, it is thereby to hide our ability to overcome them. And because our media, our public expression, is so integral to how we document and define what it means to be human, censorship eviscerates a part of the history we make, it usurps a part of who we are, and it restricts what we might become.

Let us, therefore, seek truth at any cost—especially if that cost is merely our discomfort. For never has the human story been easy, and never has success been achieved through ignorance. Not to see how the world really is, or not to see how others would portray it, is to acquiesce to infantile torpor; it is to cuddle up with timidity, and it is to be weak. Yet this very ignorance is what our government would have us defend in the guise of responsibility, in the interest of our children, and with some fabricated concern for the least among us whose virgin ears, we are told, might bleed at our negligence not to protect them.

Let us grow again to accept that sometimes life is just cruel, just brutish, and just short. Only then might we realize the beauty and greatness there is in overcoming the circumstances that might stand in the way of real human flourishing. Only then might our children go to school prepared for what the world is really like. And only then will we afford ourselves the opportunity to become what we are, both one at a time and as a society of connected lives. There can be no progress unless there is truth. Let us, therefore, stand up for what we know—that parents, not their government, are in charge of raising the next generation; that being informed is more important than being comfortable; that being ready is better than being naïve; and that being allowed to speak one’s mind or show one’s thoughts, however explicit they may be, is better than to live with a falsely rosy conception of the world, or with the negligent ambition thus to depict it.

Trust not, therefore, a government that strives to mitigate your social discomfort or to abate your anxiety. That is not its job. Rather, believe in leaders who care not about your unrest, or that of your children, for both responsibilities are yours to bear. Only in a world like this do we give ourselves a fair chance to flourish, to learn, to teach, and to be prepared for the eventualities that grow only more insidious the more we pretend that they have already gone away.