

Stamping on the 'anti-vaxxers' – a very stupid idea

17th November 2020

The COVID19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the concerns that a number of people have about vaccination. However, such is the eagerness to develop a vaccine, and get everyone to take it, that authorities are now looking to ban anyone who raises doubts. For example, the Labour Party in the UK is now calling for emergency 'anti-vaccine' laws:

'Emergency laws to "stamp out dangerous" anti-vaccine content online should be introduced, Labour has said. The party is calling for financial and criminal penalties for social media firms that do not remove false scare stories about vaccines.'

*It follows news of progress on the first effective coronavirus vaccine. The government said it took the issue "extremely seriously" with "a major commitment" from Facebook, Twitter and Google to tackle anti-vaccine content.'*¹

There are so many things that could be said about this, that it is difficult to know where to start. Or to finish. I think in this blog I am just going to stick to focussing on a single issue. Which is that, if the intention of such laws is to ensure more people are keen to be vaccinated then I have news for the Labour party.

It will almost certainly backfire.

This is because state censorship does not change minds, never has. Whilst debate, at least superficially, has been silenced, the concerns do not disappear. Instead, the doubts are often redoubled. Once you start banning and censoring and fining and arresting, people start to wonder if you are just afraid to make your case. As Wendell Phillips said, and many people think:

'He who stifles free discussion, secretly doubts whether what he professes to believe is really true.'

Once censorship starts, people are also reminded of the worst, most dreadful periods in history the world has even seen. It has always been one of the primary tools of totalitarian regimes:- Nazi Germany, Russia under Stalin, North Korea, China and Iran today.

One of the greatest books of the twentieth century is George Orwell's 1984. It is a book mainly concerned with how facts, and truth, are tightly controlled by the party.

'And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed — if all records told the same tale — then the lie passed into history and became truth.'

Of course, Orwell was not the first to notice the critical importance of freedom of speech

'Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist. That, of all rights, is the dread of tyrants. It is the right which they first of all strike down. They know its power. Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers, founded in injustice and wrong, are sure to tremble, if men are allowed to reason of righteousness, temperance, and of a judgment to come in their presence.' Frederick Douglass

'Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins. Republics and limited monarchies derive their strength and vigor from a popular examination into the action of the magistrates.' Benjamin Franklin.

Deep down we all know this. We know that this essential freedom – to say what you really believe to be true – is the essential pillar of any free society. It carries a cost, of course it carries a cost. People say stupid things, people say wrong and misguided things. They can be damaging things, but the alternative will always be much worse in the end.

I say this because people also say things that, whilst angrily dismissed at the time as dangerous foolishness, are later found to have been correct all along. I have spent many years looking at the history of medical science (if that is not, at times, an oxymoron). I have seen many activities considered to be of inarguable benefit, turn out to be indefensible malpractice.

Bernard Lown is, I think, my number one medical hero. His motto *'Do as much as possible for the patient, and as little as possible to the patient.'*

As he also said:

*'From my earliest days in medicine, I have struggled against the prevailing model of health care. My opposition in part was provoked by the growing prevalence of overtreatment. Resorting to excessive interventions seemed to be the illegitimate child of technology in the age of market medicine.'*²

He tells a tale from the 1950s where the orthodoxy of the time was to ensure strict bed rest following a heart attack. In the face of considerable hostility, he and his mentor, Dr Samuel Levine allowed patients to sit up in a comfortable chair at the end of the bed. Shock horror. In his own words:

*'The idea of moving critically ill patients into a chair was regarded as off-the-wall. Initially the house staff refused to cooperate and strenuously resisted getting patients out of bed. They accused me of planning to commit crimes not unlike those of the heinous Nazi experimentations in concentration camps. Arriving on the medical ward one morning I was greeted by interns and residents lined up with hands stretched out in a Nazi salute and a "Heil Hitler!" shouted in unison.'*³

Heil Hitler indeed. An almost perfect irony, I suppose.

It turns out that strict bed rest was absolutely and completely and totally the worst possible single thing you could do. I estimated, some years ago, that this action resulted in the premature death of around one hundred million people, worldwide. It could well have been more.

I imagine the 'Heil Hitler' shouting interns and residents would have happily endorsed censorship of any criticism of strict bed rest ... for the good of society, no doubt.

Of course, had this happened, we would probably still be enforcing strict bed rest to this very day. Once a treatment becomes 'standard practice', there is no longer anything else against which to compare it, so you have no idea if it is beneficial, or harmful. That is what happens when you ban freedom of thought, and speech.

Leaving aside the principle that freedom of speech is our single most important freedom and must be handled with exquisite care. If we crush dissent, we also crush progress. Stupid ideas will, in the end, be shown to be stupid. Nonsense will be exposed as nonsense. However, if no criticism allowed, stupid ideas that are widely believed to be true, cannot be challenged and we will be stuck – forever.

I think most people recognise this truth. I also think most people, when they see things being banned and censored ... wonder why. You immediately raise doubts. Why are they doing this, are they attempting to hide something? You will not convince anyone, ever, by censoring them, or shutting them up. You will, instead, make them more certain that you are hiding something, and that they are right.

Censorship always hardens attitudes; it does not change minds. Anti-vaxxers (whatever that stupid deliberately demeaning term means) will become more anti-vaxx. Discussion will be driven underground. Heroes and martyrs will be created. You will have done the exact opposite of what you hoped to achieve.

You don't win arguments by clubbing people into submission. All you do is silence them and redouble their determination.

1: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54947661>

2: <https://myheartsisters.org/2019/11/17/bed-rest-overtreatment-dr-bernard-lown/> 3: <https://bernardlown.wordpress.com/2011/02/03/a-chair-to-the-rescue/>

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This entry was posted in COVID-19, Vaccines on November 17, 2020

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