

Trudeau: Politics Without Spine

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (October 2019)



Melon Head, Lajos Vajda, 1936

No doubt it is the mark of bad character to rejoice, as I do, in the spectacle of a man being hoist with his own petard, and as the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has recently been hoist. And while I am at it, I confess also that, though I know that there is no art to find a mind's construction in the face, I cannot help also but judge people, at least to an extent, by their physiognomy. And the fact is that Mr Trudeau has a face as characterless as that of the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron. They are of the same ilk. You look at them and think "What nullities!" The main character discernible in their faces is lack of character.

It is not their fault, perhaps; besides which I, or you, might be mistaken in our assessment of them and actually they have backbones (or what my teachers use to call *moral fibre*) of enormous strength. In any case, there are worse things to be, especially in the field of politics, than a nullity: an evil monster, for example, would be far worse, and no one could seriously claim that either of Messrs Trudeau and Cameron are, or were, evil monsters, however little they inspire admiration.



No one, then, could accuse me of partiality for Mr Trudeau, and the abjectness of his apology for his behaviour when he was a very young man did nothing to increase my liking for him. But it seems to me that sins as a young man were venial at worst, a callow disregard of the sensibilities of others which I common in youth. I very much doubt that he was a deep-dyed racist in any dangerous way, more a silly boy having a bit of fun.

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There is a serious side to this imbroglio, of course. If the political leader of an important country can be overthrown or not re-elected on so relatively trivial a ground, while at the same time no one cares in the least about his shallow but dangerous moral posturing and obviously weak-minded pandering to the ayatollahs of an absurd and ill-founded political morality, then a new nadir of decadence and cowardice has been reached. It is a difficult question of moral philosophy as to whether it would be worse if Mr Trudeau actually believed his own political correctness or merely made use of it as a means to power. If the former, he is a fool; if the latter a knave. I leave it to others to decide which is better in a politician, or indeed in any other human being, foolishness or a knavery.

Political correctness is dangerous because when fools or knaves get into power, they may try to implement its dictates. And since many people are much more concerned to appear good than to do good, and since they are unlikely to suffer the

consequences of their own actions (except when hoist on their own petard), the implementation may continue for a long time after the negative effects of its dictates have become clear. When implemented, those dictates create a clientele dependent upon their continuation, which turns any attempt to undo the harm into a nasty social conflict.

But since I have accused both Justin Trudeau and David Cameron of characterlessness, let me in fairness refer to my own lack of courage. It became clear to me in unusual circumstances.

I had been asked to present a book I had written at a literary festival in England. I was to be the penultimate speaker of the day; the last speaker was a controversial journalist called Katie Hopkins. She was very famous, but such is my self-imposed

isolation from much modern life that I knew nothing of her. The organiser of the festival asked me whether I minded appearing at the festival with her on the list of speakers,



and I thought this was a very odd question as I found it difficult to imagine a literary person, left, right or centre, who was so objectionable that I would refuse to participate in an event that included him or her. I replied that, almost as a matter of principle, I would not object.

I looked her up on the internet afterwards. If political correctness can have a mirror-image, she was it. Alexander

Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism*, said that it was not the purpose of poetry to utter new thoughts, but to say 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well-express'd'; Katie Hopkins, by contrast, specialised in saying what oft was thought, but no one dared express. In so doing, she sometimes (as even she admitted) went beyond the bounds of decency or good taste. One of her better characteristics was her acceptance of ferocious and even sometimes abusive criticism with apparent good humour. He who lives by strong opinions should be prepared to die by strong opinions.

In the course of my internet search, I watched her performance on a television programme about obesity. It was her view that obesity was the consequence of the obese having eaten too much and exercised too little. As my teachers would sometimes say to one of their pupils who was putting on more weight than he should, no fat person came out of Belsen. Miss Hopkins not only aired her forthright view, but had proved its well-foundedness, at least as far as food consumption was concerned, by deliberately over-eating so as to put on 60 pounds in weight, which she then promptly lost by the simple though not necessarily easy expedient of dieting.

In the studio with her were some fat young women. When I say fat, I do not mean mildly overweight, I mean grossly obese. In my childhood there were almost no such women. There was a certain magnificence to them; they had done their best to turn themselves out well, and were certainly not slovenly. They claimed not to be ashamed of their condition, or state, and were inclined to blame something other than themselves for the vastness of their proportions.

Miss Hopkins was having none of it. She stuck to her guns like

one of those Japanese soldiers who refused to believe that the war was over. Her own case proved her point. She did not just speak in general terms; she applied her doctrine to the particular individuals in the studio with her.

From the purely intellectual point of view I mostly agreed with her. In essence, my teachers had been right, though perhaps a certain refinement of their views might be politic. There are genetic medical conditions—Prader-Willi Syndrome, for example—in which the appetite is enormously increased. I had a patient whose daughter suffered from Prader-Willi, a combination of very low intelligence, obesity and voracious appetite, who became violent if she were not fed as much as she desired. It was impossible in practice for my patient not to give in to her daughter's demands for more food, with the result that she, her daughter, became ever larger, expanding over the sides of the bed in which she spent most of her life (until she died aged 28). Nevertheless, despite the fact that her voracious appetite was not under her conscious control, it remains the case that if, somehow or other, she had not been fed excessively, she would not have become so grossly obese. But we live in times when marginal cases are made to bear too great a metaphysical burden.

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Everyone knows—it is a matter of common observation—that some people are more inclined to put on weight than others. Some lucky people appear to eat as much as they like and remain as thin as a rake; others (as they put it, exaggerating greatly)

only have to look at food to put on weight. We see this in breeds of dog: Labradors run to fat and will eat as much as they are given; my little dog would eat as much as he wanted, but could be induced to eat no more and never put on an ounce of weight. Naturally, I credited him with a superior moral character that accounted for his self-control and moderation in consumption.

There is another lesson about obesity to be had from dogs: fat families tend to have fat dogs, as in a painting by Francisco Botero. This clearly is because they overfeed them, projecting on to the animal the same incontinent appetite as themselves. I have seen fat mothers overfeeding their children in like manner, treating them almost as geese to be fattened for *foie gras*. A child that has been fattened by its mother in



this fashion will indeed have difficulties in losing weight once it has reached the age of discretion. Nevertheless, not every fat child becomes a fat adult, albeit that it has been given an additional handicap in life quite unfairly. There was an extreme case recently in which a mother in Britain continued to overfeed her son grotesquely, even when told that she was endangering his life; and he did indeed die aged 13 of the consequences of his obesity. It is difficult not to see child abuse in the mother's conduct, but there is obviously a

danger that, on the basis of such a case, and on that of the reduced life expectancy of the very fat, dictatorial authorities will separate fat children, of whom there are now untold numbers, from their parents, allegedly for their own good.

Despite these qualifications, Miss Hopkins was, like my teachers, in essence right. And yet, if I had been invited on to such a programme, I could not have said to the fat women's faces what Katie Hopkins said to them. Would this have been moral cowardice or a manifestation of sensitivity? For though the fat women had volunteered for the programme and must have had at least an inkling of the humiliation Katie Hopkins was likely to inflict upon them given her reputation for uncompromising forthrightness, and could therefore be said to have brought that humiliation on themselves, nevertheless I could not help but see in them suffering human beings, people who could not be happy with or in themselves. If we are not to be compassionate towards those who bring their suffering on themselves, there will be many fewer occasions for compassion. At the same time, I recognise that part of my inability to have been as forthright as Katie Hopkins in a situation such as this would have been the result of a pusillanimous wish not to appear to others as a swine. In other words, I am not a fearless fighter for the truth in any and all circumstances.

I can be pusillanimous even unto death. Once I arrived at Munch Airport to give a talk somewhere near the Austrian border. The businessman who had invited me and came to meet me smelled very strongly of drink and was clearly drunk to the point of slight incoordination. To my horror, he led me to his car, which was the most luxurious and lamentably powerful model of BMW. I sat in the passenger seat while he manipulated the steering wheel with what seemed to me considerable

insouciance, or as much insouciance as his protuberant stomach pressed against the wheel would permit.

Things were not too bad, that is to say only moderately frightening, until we reached the highway, on which, in Germany, there are no speed limits. Oddly enough, this highly disciplined people, the



Germans, become a nation of raving madmen once on a highway. They make the drivers of Naples seem like old age pensioners. However fast you go, there will always be someone who will come up to within three feet of your rear and flash his lights to get you to move over, as if he were an ambulance driver rushing an emergency case to hospital. If, as if often the way, you have a line of trucks on the inside lane, all you can do is accelerate dangerously.

Still exhaling alcohol, and not concentrating on the road at all, my host proceeded immediately to accelerate to a hundred and forty miles an hour, mainly looking at me while he talked. But so strong were my social inhibitions that, despite what I estimated as a fifty-fifty chance of arriving alive at our destination, I said nothing, not even uttering a feeble request that he slow down a little.

Therefore, when I look in the glass I see staring out at me—Justin Trudeau and David Cameron writ small.

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