

At Speaker's Corner, It's Time to Show Muslims Some Respect

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Tommy Robinson at Speaker's Corner

When I first went to London, decades ago, I was shown around by an English friend who wanted me to observe the Parliament in session, to see justice being administered at a criminal trial at the Old Bailey, to visit the Tower of London, and most of all, he wanted to show me that living example of free unfettered speech, Speaker's Corner at Hyde Park, celebrated all over the world as a place where anyone could stand up and speak his piece, from an articulate political orator to an end-of-the-world-is-coming crank, without fear of being shut

down either by the government, or by private parties. Speaker's Corner was formally recognized as the place for such free speech by an act of Parliament in 1872. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Communists and capitalists, holy-rollers and atheists, all were welcome to speak their peace. It was give-and-take, speech and counter-speech, let-me-talk-and-then-you'll-have-your-turn, on every conceivable topic. Foreign visitors, especially those from countries where speech was controlled by the government, were much impressed.

It is now clear that Speaker's Corner is no longer quite that bastion of free speech that it once was. In the interest of what is comically called "social cohesion," speeches that just might anger one group – Muslims – are no longer always permitted. Tommy Robinson has been forced by the police to leave Speaker's Corner on several occasions – sometimes before he had a chance even to begin to talk. On March 18, before he spoke, Muslims deliberately provoked scuffles – some say it was a mini-riot – but fortunately, on this occasion, Robinson managed to read in its entirety a speech written by the Austrian Martin Sellner, an anti-Islam activist whom the British authorities just recently prevented from entering the United Kingdom. And that speech had another consequence: when Lutz Bachmann, the leader of Pegida, a German organization whose members are alarmed about the influx of millions of Muslims into Germany (and therefore "right-wing"), arrived at Heathrow in mid-March, the police found a copy of Sellner's speech in Bachmann's luggage – he had been planning to read it at Speaker's Corner. They promptly impounded it and refused entry to Bachmann, just as they had to Sellner before him, so that the Pegida founder was forced to return to Germany.

Muslims are now a privileged group in Great Britain. The British authorities seem to think they must treat Muslims as they treat no other group – that is, to protect them from criticism even at Speaker's Corner. This demonstrates little

faith in the ability of Muslims to defend themselves with speech of their own. And there is a second implication from what the authorities have done. They suggested that "violence" could result if Lutz Bachmann were allowed to speak, or Martin Sellner before him, reasons which were sufficient to keep them out of the country. Do they have so low a view of Muslims as to think they are incapable of refraining from violence? Do Muslims themselves not see that by welcoming such censorship on their behalf, they are signaling both that they are not up to the task of answering critics civilly and convincingly, and that they are unable to control their emotions, but are almost certain to respond to words with violence? Shouldn't we treat Muslims not with such obvious contempt but, rather, assume they are just as capable as other groups of answering criticism, and that they will not have recourse to riots to silence their critics?

No one knew exactly what was in Martin Sellner's speech when the British police prevented Lutz Bachmann from entering Great Britain, because that speech was in his suitcase. The police already knew that Bachmann has long been labelled "right-wing," and Sellner, too, has had that "right-wing" epithet affixed to his name. No one questions these epithets; it's the same with Jihad Watch, which, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, is a "right-wing" and "hate" site, and for too many, those adjectives are not questioned but simply accepted, not to be dislodged by facts. In the United Kingdom, the police exhibit a dangerous mindset – a tremendous fear of being labelled "Islamophobic" or "racist" by Muslims and their defenders – that caused them for so long to keep from investigating Muslim grooming gangs. That mindset can also be seen in the insensate censorship of the most articulate foreign critics of Islam, who are not only being kept from making speeches even at the one place in the world that most symbolizes freedom of speech, Speaker's Corner at Hyde Park, but in many cases, are also being prevented even from entering Great Britain, because of the putative "disorder" their mere

presence would bring.

The Heckler's Veto is the name given, in American Constitutional law (it's a term first proposed by Harry Kalven at the University of Chicago Law School), to the police shutting down a speaker if a crowd's response to him becomes a threat to the public order. Many find it a dangerous doctrine, for it rewards the unruly and the violent. But at least in the case of the Heckler's Veto, the shutting down of a speaker only occurs after he has had a chance to speak at least some of what he came to say, and then disruption followed. And only when the police found they could not contain or suppress the disruption did they, most reluctantly and infrequently, stop the speaker. The British are now engaged not in halting speech, but in preventing speech, a certain category of speech, speech that is critical of Islam and that offends Muslims, and they are doing so with the excuse that such speech might lead to disruption by that one group. This is the Heckler's Veto on stilts, a Heckler's Veto of speech that never even gets a chance to be spoken.

Here's what a successor to Theresa May should say, to undo the damage her government has done to the exercise of free speech. He (or she) could make the following speech in defense of that right and its exercise at Speaker's Corner:

"My predecessor, and she was not alone, apparently believed that the full freedom of speech was not to be granted to one category of speech at Speaker's Corner, at Hyde Park: the speech of those who take a dim view of Islam. Apparently she deemed such censorship as necessary for two reasons, neither of them flattering to Muslims. First, she seems to have thought that Muslims themselves were incapable of articulately responding to criticism, of correcting any misinformation about Islam that a critical speaker conveyed, and of course, of adducing evidence from the Qur'an and other Islamic texts to support their position. Second, she – and the police who answered to her – assumed that Muslims, more than other

groups, were much more likely to respond with violence against opponents, which in their case meant those who criticized either Islam or Muslims. Our government finds these assumptions both damaging to free speech and demeaning to Muslims. Our predecessor's policy of keeping out foreign critics of Islam, and preventing British critics, too, from fully exercising their free speech rights on the grounds that this could result in riots, is hereby ended. Muslims at Speaker's Corner will from now on be subject to the same treatment as all other groups, neither more nor less. They will have to tolerate criticism just like other groups, and must learn both to endure, and to reply, to such criticism without resort to violence, or to the shouting down of opponents. Any kind of public disorder, of course, employed as a way to scare off critics, or to prevent them from being heard, will not be tolerated. That's why the police are there: to protect speakers, not to haul them away. Let the Speaker's Corner at Hyde Park return to being what it has been formally for 150 years: the preeminent symbol of the right of free speech, and the place where it has most famously been exercised. And let's treat Muslims with respect by not assuming they must – uniquely – be protected from criticism, as if they are incapable of answering cogently in their own defense, or by assuming that they will be uniquely violent in their response to such public criticism."

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