

Robert Kilroy-Silk writes on...Freedom of Speech

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You probably saw the photograph of me covered head to toe in stinking muck last week before appearing on Radio 4's "Any Questions". Some people, I know, thought it very funny. They had a good laugh.

But this was not just an assault on me. The assailant with the blue bucket brimming with farmyard muck was attacking free speech. After I had detained him, he screamed that I had insulted his "brothers religion and insulted Islam".

That is not actually true. I haven't. But leave that to one side. Instead of engaging in a debate with me and attempting to prove me wrong, get me to admit my errors, change my mind, apologise, he resorts to violence and cowardly attacks me from behind.

Unfortunately there are some people in this country who cannot handle free speech. They do not seem to be able to cope with opposing points of view. So they seek to suppress them.

Some of them got together to burn Salman Rushdie's book *Satanic Verses*, because they disliked its message. Others ganged-up on the BBC to get me sacked for telling the truth about some repressive Arab regime in this newspaper. Now they resort to violence. In Holland, as we know, it goes further.

This intolerance exercised by a few must not be tolerated. This is not a trivial matter. It is vitally important. Free speech – the ability to express your views freely, fearlessly, robustly, and yes, even cause offence, is the basis of our democracy and all our other freedoms. It must not be compromised.

Unfortunately there are some amongst us who ought to know better that are already selling the pass. They think they are being fair, politically correct, whereas in fact they are being weak.

This was true of the BBC when it allowed itself to be panicked and bullied by a vociferous, but well organised minority of Muslims into taking Kilroy off the air in January. And now the Government has joined the appeasers. The law that it is proposing to make criticism of religions illegal is no more than a sop, as many commentators have pointed out, to Muslim voters in Labour marginals. It is a dangerous proposal. It cannot be enforced. Worse, it will do serious damage to race relations. Is that really what the Government wants?

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