

Can we rescue civility in public discourse?

Mark Kingwell

February 22, 2024

Mark Kingwell is a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto.

Some three decades ago I published my first book, a footnote-heavy volume based on my doctoral dissertation. It was a defence of civility as a political virtue in pluralistic societies – those where more than one vision of human flourishing exists alongside others.

Civility, I argued, is not politeness or good manners. It is, instead, a baseline willingness to seek justice together with others who are not like-minded. Civil discourse is a binding feature of nations that would otherwise fly apart under the pressure of their differences.

The book won a nice prize and got some good reviews, and I was very pleased, because I thought that meant that I was right about the importance of civility in the politics of diversity. Imagine my dismay, then, as the years unfolded between then and now. Not only was diversity more and more divisive, hinging on exclusive claims of grievance or demands for “moral clarity,” but the standards of public debate grew coarser by the week.

I’m not a fool: I know there was no golden age of civil public discourse, and only fuddy-duddies now recall the scandal of “fuddle duddle” (try Google). I even recognize that optimistic defenders of the virtues of civility have had to pivot to issuing ominous warnings on the dangers of incivility. That is: if incivility is a collective action problem, a classic race to the bottom, good actors must resist its fleeting temptation. The more uncivil your interlocutor becomes, the more perverse incentives arise for you to go even lower. And then everybody loses for winning.

That tragedy of the commons reveals Donald Trump as the avatar of the age: his rambling tirades of semi-coherent insult and disrespect can go no lower – until the next time he speaks. Opponents are hamstrung by their vestiges of decency and, frankly, basic desire to retain sanity. You can’t out-Trump Trump in this fractured discursive economy.

I recently heard a CNN political commentator refer to Mr. Trump, twice, as “an asshole.” That was pointless as well as unseemly, however accurate. The bottom has been reached, and is only being scraped by the former president. Good ideas will not force out bad in this marketplace, as John Stuart Mill imagined; rather, they have simply been priced out of the system.

So much is obvious, and lamentable. But can we mount a rescue mission for civility? My colleagues at the University of Toronto think so. The news came last month that English professor and administrator Randy Boyagoda has been appointed the university’s civility czar – or, as we college Latinates like to say, “provostial advisor.”

I know Prof. Boyagoda from literary circles. He is a novelist as well as an academic, a past president of PEN Canada. He is witty, sharply intelligent and humane. There could be no better candidate for the job. Nevertheless, you have to wonder what sin he committed to deserve this thankless assignment. I picture him with Tom Hanks’s battle-weary face, hearing that his next detail is to save Private Ryan.

Universities and colleges are making headlines for all the wrong reasons right now, from the high-profile cancelling of Ivy League presidents over campus speech codes to squabbles concerning visa-student caps. The latter issue led to at least one Ontario college president calling another a “whore,” which might seem quaint in our socially mediated times of death threats and swatting.

More stories below advertisement

Much more dangerous is the continuing high-octane subject of the Gaza war, which has exposed more fault-lines in the political edifice than any issue most of us can remember. The deep feelings on either side of this conflict are heightened by all the worst features of contemporary discursive life: the online filter-bubbles, vivid but unverifiable images, violent demands for certainty.

In a 1990 study, the legal scholar Laurence Tribe labelled the abortion debate “the clash of absolutes,” noting with some prescience that the two sides would never agree. We see a clash just as fervent in the prospect of a two-state solution in the Middle East, which strikes many people as the only way out but is anathema to parties on both sides of the violence. Every political difference feels like a clash of absolutes now, our volume knobs forever turned to 11.

My own recent experience at the University of Toronto, even in classes on politics, is that the students don’t want to talk about Gaza. The silence is deafening. Safe subjects include analysis of the watermelon meme or the Situationist notion of “spectacle” as a feature of political life. But that’s it. (I do know colleagues who have had to deal with far more fractious situations.)

Civility means talking to each other, not holding your tongue out of fear or, worse, disdain for the other. It depends on the idea that disagreement is only possible against a background of agreement about shared destiny. Practice is essential for its success, because here habit is the parent of virtue.

Do we want to go on living together, on campus and off? If we do, civility isn’t a luxury good, it’s the life-blood of democratic citizenship.

The Ted K Archive

Mark Kingwell

Can we rescue civility in public discourse?

February 22, 2024

The Globe and Mail. <www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-can-we-rescue-civility-in-public-discourse/>

www.thetedkarchive.com