

# An Apparent Paradox

*'Conservatives' who favour discipline and high expectations for all are really 'liberals.'*

By Melanie Phillips

*(Ms. Phillips is the author of All Must Have Prizes. She wrote the following column on moving from the left-wing newspaper The Observer to the centrist Sunday Times.)*

Yes, I've changed. My passion is still to help the poor and the vulnerable. But now, as I leave you, my fury is against the dogma and cant that keeps the weakest on their knees.

This is the last column I shall write for *The Observer*. It brings to an end 21 years of working for Guardian Newspapers. I depart considerably more embattled than when I arrived, but it is a battle that has been fought out with my own side, a kind of cultural civil war in which I have found myself, to my considerable astonishment, a controversial combatant.

Controversial, because I have been accused of moving my political position. Some might think that unless one's thinking does move in response to learned experience, one might as well be dead. Yet to many of those who consider themselves to be liberal in outlook and on the Left in politics, deviation from the 'correct' position on any issue is considered to be 'a move to the Right.'

This so-called 'liberal' position is held to be on the side of the angels against the forces of darkness, otherwise known as Conservatism. So those who dare to criticize it, highlight its absurdities, or — worse — point out the harm it is doing to the very people it purports to help, and that it is not really liberal at all, are themselves to be excoriated as Conservative fellow-travellers, scorned as backward-looking reactionaries, and vilified as moralizers.

An extraordinary situation has developed. To protest that children are being left illiterate or innumerate at school is to stand accused of advocating the cruel and pointless teaching practices of Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind.

There is huge confusion over the word 'liberal' itself, a word appropriated by people who are anything but. They stand instead for a deadly combination of licence and authoritarianism which brooks absolutely no dissent, and they will cheerfully trample down the vulnerable to uphold an ugly rights culture that gives them what they want.

Sure, I've changed; but not in the way that is claimed. My principal concern remains, as it has always been, for the most vulnerable, the people at the bottom of the heap, and about fashioning a progressive politics that cares for the well-being of all in society.

What did change dramatically over the years was my perception of why vulnerable people were in the position they were in, and of the brazen abuse of power by those who claimed to have their interests at heart but whose actions seemed instead to have the effect of keeping them trapped in disadvantage. And that change in perception was brought about in large measure by my experiences in writing about these issues.

When I started writing about education in the late Eighties, I wrote that there seemed to be a culture of low expectations and achievement which was hurting children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. What appeared to me to be a statement of the obvious provoked the verbal equivalent of World War III. The reaction was an eye-opener.

Abuse replaced argument, demonstrable facts were denied, absurd assertions were upheld as unchallengeable truths. But other letters arrived from parents and teachers saying they were so relieved that someone was saying these things; but I must never reveal their names or they or their children would be penalized.

Astonished and disturbed, I wrote again on the subject. The more I

wrote, the more disturbing reaction I got; and the more the storm raged, the more I wrote. Gradually, it seemed to me there was a bigger issue here than education. It concerned the nature of truth and lies; and the so-called 'liberal,' educated, enlightened wing of the argument was not in the truth camp. This shook me as deeply as it puzzled me.

I was always very concerned about poverty, and remain so. It is a blight which, in a civilized society, the better-off have a duty to alleviate. But it gradually appeared to me that poverty was being used as a catch-all excuse for failings of behaviour.

This defied logic. Poverty used to be worse, but without these devastating effects. Relative poverty was worse in other countries with less crime; more egalitarian countries had equally bad crime rates. Children who were as poor as each other did spectacularly better in some schools than in others. And so on.

Behind all the arguments about welfare, family, education and culture lies the fundamental question: where should the moral boundaries for a liberal society be set? The task of any responsible politics is surely to reassert the great liberal paradox, that freedom can only be achieved within constraints.

Certain self-serving and obnoxious fallacies have to be exposed for the damage they do: the fallacy that hedonism has no bad consequences for others; the fallacy that equality trumps every other value and is an end in itself; the fallacy that tolerance means dispensing with norms of behaviour.

A very free society like ours needs boundaries or else we will lose our freedoms in a war of entitlements in which the weakest will go to the wall.

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