There is no doubt that racial prejudice is alive and well but quashing free speech is no answer

It ought to be a triumphal moment for American liberalism. In the space of a few years gay marriage has been accepted, marijuana has been legalised, America has twice elected its first black president and may well be gearing up to elect its first woman. Yet the revival of political
correctness on US campuses — and the increasingly shrill tone of much of the intellectual left — tells another story. Instead of championing free speech, the left is trying to shut it down. In the name of diversity, it demands conformity. At stake is the character of US democracy. If elite Ivy League schools cannot stand the heat, what kind of kitchen will it be?

Far from outgrowing race, the PC movement is entrenching it. Princeton students this month occupied the university president’s office demanding the name Woodrow Wilson — America’s 28th president and former head of Princeton — be scrubbed from campus. That included the prestigious Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy and International Affairs, residential halls and a mural of him in the dining hall. Protesters also demanded “cultural competency training” for faculty members and the introduction of mandatory courses on marginalised peoples.

The case against Wilson is simple. He reintroduced segregation into the federal workforce. The case in his favour is that he is an important historic figure. He was also author of the Treaty of Versailles. Once you start eliminating names, it is a journey without end. Logic would demand the renaming of Washington, since America’s first president owned slaves. Others, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, were guiltier. Should they be judged solely on that? Winston Churchill was an unabashed imperialist. Yet history judges him kindly for standing up to Nazism. What about Franklin Roosevelt? America’s 32nd president did not lift a finger to advance civil rights. He also interned 120,000 Japanese-Americans in the second world war. These were, each thing as an uncomplicated historic figure.

The point of higher education is to inculcate a spirit of inquiry and toughen up the mind for the confusing world beyond. Yet US campuses are moving in the opposite direction. Today’s mantra is to create “safe spaces”. Campus libraries put “trigger warnings” on works of fiction: students are warned off Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* because it depicts rape, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (anti-semitism), F Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (misogyny) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (patriarchy). The term “microaggression” — giving unconscious verbal offence to marginalised groups — has entered everyday vocabulary. I have lost count of the conversations I have had with faculty heads who admit to censoring their language for fear of giving offence. Their jobs are sometimes at stake.

The goal is to eliminate prejudice from the mind. Yet it can have the perverse effect of heightening awareness of race. There is a boom on America’s campuses — and beyond — of what one critic has dubbed the “race therapy complex”. University faculties are bulging with multicultural guidance counsellors, diversity officers and those whose task it is to provide training in racial etiquette. Their job is to detect racial insensitivity. Naturally, some find it where it does not exist. The more such positions are created, the greater the vested interests behind it. As Upton Sinclair said: “It is difficult
to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

There is no doubt that racial prejudice is alive and well on the streets of America: look at the frequency of trigger-happy police responses to unarmed black suspects. But quashing free speech is no answer. Last year student protests forced a number of outside speakers — including Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund; Condoleezza Rice, former US secretary of state; and women’s rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali — to withdraw from campus events. As head of the IMF, Ms Lagarde was a “primary culprit in failed developmental policies in the world’s poorest countries”, according to the students at Smith College. Ms Rice was a “war criminal” for supporting the Iraq invasion, said students at Rutgers. Ms Ali was guilty of Islamaphobia, said students at the University of Michigan.

This year was notable for safe commencement speakers. On UK campuses it is called “no-platforming”: to deprive those with whom you disagree of a chance to speak. For the record, I think the Iraq invasion was a colossal mistake and Ms Ali plays up dangerous stereotypes of the Muslim world. But different voices should be heard and debated.

What does this mean for the future? Forget about universities. The future has already graduated. Anyone with ambition in US public life has long since learnt the value of self-censorship. A word out of context can ruin your chances of being confirmed by the US Senate. Risk-taking is penalised. Blandness is key to career advancement. Little wonder large swaths of the American public have lost faith in their leaders’ integrity. When a politician speaks, the effect is too often chloroformic. The vacuum that spontaneity once occupied is wide open for others to fill. Next time you wonder why a demagogue like Donald Trump is doing so well, ask why there is such high return to his plain spokenness. Could it be because it is being rooted out of public life?

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