

318. Liberalism is not to blame for Bondi Beach

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Opportunities present in Western societies for economic prosperity and social advancement will over time erode whatever tribal loyalties, barbaric customs or ancient hatreds immigrants bring to the new country. Without much thinking or even against their judgement, newcomers will find themselves adapting to Western ways and institutions. Perhaps they, or at least their children, will even come to embrace Western values such as equal rights for all, secularity, the rule of law, procedural fairness, meritocracy, and democratic decision-making.

Patrick Keeney is right that that's all nonsense (Bondi Beach and the failure of the liberal imagination, *Western Standard*, 02 January 2026). And he's right that the inability of so many of us, especially so many within our ruling classes, to see that it is nonsense has contributed to such horrors as the Bondi Beach massacre.

Keeney is wrong, though, to ascribe this nonsense to liberalism. Nothing in liberalism as a set of attitudes or a political creed implies or suggests the idea that people of whatever persuasion will inevitably become good liberals just by living in a liberal country. Nothing in liberalism gives us hope that the illiberal people in our society won't try instead to introduce caste systems, male privilege, Sharia law or authoritarian rule to their new country. Liberalism is a fighting creed, one that can recognize dangers and can inspire us to enter the fray to preserve and protect liberal ways and institutions.

My disagreement with Keeney's article is that it is not liberalism, but, *contrarily, the weakening and abandonment of liberal institutions and values that is the (or an important) source of the troubles Keeney describes*. I think it is important to see this, as otherwise we might feel we need, for the sake of our safety and security, to abandon liberal ways and take up the communitarianism Keeney favours.

Central to liberalism is the autonomy of the individual. A person possesses intellectual autonomy to the extent that he is able to think for himself, and a person possesses moral autonomy to the extent that he is aware of his values and preferences and able to reflect critically upon them. Intellectual and moral autonomy are conceptually distinct, but it is difficult to imagine a person possessing one of them but lacking the other.

To be autonomous is to be able and willing to think and value for oneself. Not from scratch, of course, but from the position one is in. While autonomy might be something all people are capable of, it is not something people simply mature into as they grow into adults. It is, rather, an

accomplishment, one that can be attained only in certain environments under certain kinds of tutelage. And it is never complete: those who possess autonomy are always only more or less autonomous in their thinking and valuing.

People who value intellectual and moral autonomy do so because they want to choose (or affirm), and to be responsible for, their own lives. It is the joy of creation and the pride of ownership that moves them. Since they value autonomy, they wish to live in societies that encourage and support thinking and valuing for oneself. These would be societies that protect civil liberties, respect the rule of law, maintain equality of opportunity, are meritocratic, feature a robust civil society, have a strong market economy, and favour democratic decision-making wherever decisions are binding on all. In other words, people who value individual autonomy are liberals and want to live in liberal societies and communities.

Keeney's complaint about liberalism is that neutral procedures, legal rights and fair elections are hard to get excited about, at least for most people, even in liberal societies. These values are too thin and abstract to command deep allegiance or to foster social cohesion. Honouring them prevents us from seeing our neighbours and countrymen as other than counters in our pursuit of our individual ends. We need, Keeney says, if we are to be safe in a dangerous world, to enjoy others as members of our community, and to salvage what freedoms we can, a "shared moral horizon." That is, we need to embrace a vision of the good much thicker than that available in liberalism.

Keeney's mistake here is to take what are instrumental liberal values for deep or foundational liberal values. It's true that few could value neutral procedures for their own sake, especially when one understands that a neutral procedure might generate a result one doesn't like. But liberals value neutral procedures not as an end itself but as an expression of their love of autonomy, which is their love of people making lives for themselves on their own values. We love in ourselves and admire in others the creativity and responsibility that only freedom makes possible.

Love of autonomy in oneself and in others is not a thin reed on which to build communities and societies. And the machinery of liberalism—the neutral rules and impersonal institutions—is worth defending for the sake of that love.

Keeney is right, of course, that liberalism is but one tradition of attitude and practice among innumerable others and that it's always been a minority taste, even in the historically few societies that might count as liberal. But this is not news to liberals. Some theorists of liberalism have attempted to ground liberal values in human nature or transcendental imperatives, it is true, but others haven't. Many of us who find liberalism attractive do so only as a result of contingent historical and social factors, and we are aware that that's the case.

Liberalism is not at odds with human nature, though, even as it is not generated by human nature or an end toward which all societies tend. But because it is not an expression of something deep within all people, it needs to be nurtured and defended. Liberals who realize this are not complacent in the face of large-scale immigration from traditional, authoritarian or closed societies. They know it important to create the conditions and to supply the tutelage needed for

liberal ways to take hold of newcomers. They know it important at least to have one law for everyone and to enforce that law impartially.

This is why I contend that much of the mayhem mass immigration has brought to many Western nations is a result of our abandoning liberal attitudes and ways, and that (part of) the solution is recommitting to liberalism. Civil liberties, including freedom of expression, came under fire in Canada and elsewhere in the 1970s, and now no political party supports them. The practice of cancelling people with incorrect views spread far and wide in the wake of declining respect for civil liberties. But lacking the freedom to speak one's views without sanction (official or unofficial), we cannot identify problems or critically discuss proposed solutions. In addition to that, respect for individual autonomy has been replaced by respect for identities and feelings, and meritocracy has given way to representation and sinecures. These are the developments that have encouraged the tribalism Keeney rightly fears and the widespread unwillingness to confront problems honestly.

If we are to create an environment in which people do well to adhere to liberal ways and to participate in liberal institutions, even should they not embrace liberal values, and renounce tribalism and violence as practices, we would do well to insist upon the rule of law, impartial procedures, civil liberties, a robust civil society, meritocracy and democratic decision-making, and all the other expressions of love for individual autonomy in communities of autonomous individuals.