

A Certain Type of Absurdity



Demonstrators hold placards as they take part in the “Let Women Speak” rally in George Square, in Glasgow, Scotland, on Feb. 5, 2023. (Andy Buchanan/AFP via Getty Images)

by Theodore Dalrymple

A survey of Canadian opinion carried out for the [Macdonald-Laurier Institute](#) found that the majority of Canadians still think that prisons should remain segregated by sex: to which one is inclined to add, amen to that.

All surveys of opinion are subject to caveat, of course; one can rarely be sure that they’re representative of the population as a whole, or that respondents weren’t trying to please the inquirers, or that the wording of the question asked didn’t affect the outcome.

For me, however, the most significant finding of the survey was that 28 percent of respondents believed that male-bodied prisoners who identified as women should be imprisoned with

women, 6 percent more than those who thought they should be imprisoned with men. The rest thought they should have separate facilities of their own.

The evolution of opinion is probably impossible to estimate with any certainty, though it's possible to guess. The question was never asked 20 years ago, and indeed couldn't have been asked, so bizarre would it have seemed. The answer probably would have been a laugh rather than a verbal answer, and the very fact that it would or couldn't have been asked 20 years ago is itself highly significant. The question wasn't then even a question, at least not for the general public: and the year 2003 is not yet ancient history.

It would be interesting to know the characteristics of the 28 percent cited above. My surmise is that they were younger and more educated than average or than the 72 percent of the people in the survey who thought that prisoners with male bodies should *not* be imprisoned with women. The sad fact is that, as George Orwell once remarked, it's necessary to have a higher level of education than average to believe in a certain type of absurdity. This is even more the case today when so much of our education seems to fall into two stages: indoctrination by others followed by auto-indoctrination.

One might have thought that educated people in general and intellectuals in particular would be less susceptible to evident absurdity than the uneducated and the great mass of the population: But one would be mistaken. And there's a good reason for this.

The status of intellectual requires that one has thoughts that aren't those of the great mass, or at any rate the majority, of mankind (and even with the massification of the intelligentsia as a result of the expansion of tertiary education, the intelligentsia remains a minority). For the modern intellectual, the search for truth becomes the search for rationalizations for whatever strange beliefs distinguish

the intellectual from the *hoi polloi*. Ideology is to the intelligentsia what superstition is to the mass of mankind; and not to have opinions that clash with those of the majority is, for an intellectual, to lose caste, like a Brahmin who crosses the sea. What's the point of being an intellectual, after all, if you come to a conclusion that everyone already believes to be the case?

The majority isn't always right or intellectuals always wrong. What was regarded as perfectly normal, acceptable, or even virtuous in one age is regarded as self-evidently monstrous by another, often as a result of the efforts of intellectuals to alert the population or powers that be to the moral monstrosity of what they accept without question. Cruelty to animals, for example, which we now assume without further reflection to be an evil, was once accepted because the treatment of animals wasn't even a matter for moral concern. It's the undoubted fact that the majority has often unthinkingly subscribed to a horrible or vile morality that gives the intellectuals their opportunity to promote destructive certainties. A false syllogism goes something like this:

The majority thinks that prisoners with male bodies who identify as women shouldn't be sent to women's prisons. The majority is often wrong. Therefore, prisoners with male bodies who identify as women ought to be sent to women's prisons.

What's surprising, perhaps, and deeply significant, is that a proportion of the population that's far from tiny—more than a quarter, if the survey I have quoted is accurate—can be brought to believe something so counter-intuitive in so historically a short time. A view that not very long before would have been considered absurd and even unthinkable has become almost an orthodoxy for a certain proportion of the population. And while it rests a minority view for the moment, it's the view of what in the long run is the most important part of the population, the intelligentsia: for democracy

notwithstanding, the vote of the intellectual has at least quadruple the weight of that of the average citizen, who will either follow him in the end or have his views imposed upon him.

The furore in practically the whole Western world over transsexualism, a condition that affects a very tiny proportion of humanity, is a textbook case of an ideological tail wagging the political dog, which is the rest of society. There have always been transsexuals, and they should be treated with humanity and decency; but this is the first time that the condition, or whatever one calls it, has been made the subject of an ideology. A tiny minority of activists have succeeded in hijacking debate, altering society, and imposing costs upon the whole population to a degree that has probably surprised them.

This isn't the last time that an ideological tail will wag the whole dog. What the new ideology will be, or what it will attach to, I can't say, but that there will be one is almost certain. There's malign pleasure in making people believe, or pretend to believe, what's against reason and their innermost conviction. Hamlet delighted in making a fool of Polonius by asking him to agree to propositions that he knew to be false:

"Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

"Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

"Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

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