

# The hollow virtues of the progressive Left

By Patrick Keeney

I remain deeply committed to the principles I believed once defined the progressive Left – reason, empiricism, tolerance, and the defence of human dignity.

Yet the movement that once championed open inquiry, free speech, and honest debate has hardened into an unforgiving orthodoxy, driven less by ideas than by attitude. The Left I admired for its skepticism and intellectual courage has shifted into a culture of moral certitude and censoriousness. Like many, I find myself repeating the familiar refrain: I didn't leave the Left; the Left left me. What happened?



Left-wing protestors Image courtesy of Grok

Well, many things, but one of the most frustrating aspects of modern progressivism is its insatiable appetite for moral self-congratulation and theatre. As [Hannah Arendt](#) warned, when

politics shifts from persuasion to moral showmanship, it ceases to be politics altogether.

The Left today exemplifies this shift. It no longer debates but simply asserts. Its opinions are presented as invulnerable moral truths, similar to revealed religious truths. Challenging them is not just dissent but akin to committing a sin. Politics has become a stage for virtue, where slogans replace facts and emotion masquerades as thought. Consequently, on the Left, a culture of moral narcissism has developed – the comforting illusion that feeling righteous means being right.

Nowhere was this tendency more apparent than during the pandemic, when lawns and shop windows displayed that cringeworthy refrain: “In this house, we believe...” The messages on these signs were not arguments, but a catechism of progressive faith, symbols of belonging within a moral tribe. The language of belief replaced reason and empiricism; moral clichés replaced moral clarity. It was easier to recite the group’s creed than to grapple with the complexities of the COVID pandemic.

This replacement of feeling for thinking has become the defining habit of progressive culture. Words such as “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” are recited like sacred mantras, rarely examined and never clearly defined. Their purpose is not to describe but to perform – to signal virtue and to belong to the righteous. What matters is not the meaning of these words but the social grace of saying them. For the Left, feeling has replaced the discipline of reason and the rigours of empiricism.

That elevation of emotion explains why progressives now respond to dissent with indignation rather than open dialogue.

To question their premises – asking what methods they suggest, what political trade-offs they accept, or what outcomes they

expect – is seen not as an invitation to engage in a good-faith discussion but as a moral insult.

This attitude was recently vividly displayed by Katie Porter, a candidate for California governor. When [a TV reporter asked how](#) she planned to reach the 40% of Californians who had voted for Trump, Porter was indignant that the question was even asked, threatening to quit the interview while demanding, “I don’t want this on camera.”

Her reaction captures, in miniature, the prevailing disposition of today’s Democratic Party – and, indeed, of the contemporary Left itself: a movement marked by sanctimony and scolding, led by angry, finger-wagging candidates who claim to be inclusive but display the sort of sanctimonious bullying that belongs in a kindergarten class.

In a healthy civic culture, gubernatorial candidates would welcome such questions as the beginning of a responsible and reasonable debate. Progressives now condemn them as heresy. Kamala Harris’s remark that [“some matters are simply settled”](#) captures the progressive spirit. It is a declaration of intellectual closure. To call something “settled” is not to prove it but to bar further discussion. Certainty becomes a shield against doubt, and politics transforms into dogma. In this way, progressivism ceases to be a movement of reason and becomes a form of faith – though a faith without transcendence, mystery, or grace.

Progressive intolerance now surpasses, in both scope and sophistication, the crude hatreds it claims to oppose. Activists who speak in the language of “justice” regularly employ tactics of intimidation – public shaming, professional ostracism, doxing, and online mobs. They vandalize monuments, silence speakers, and ruin reputations, all while asserting their moral superiority. The mainstream press, largely sympathetic to their goals, turns a blind eye. Even outlets that once prided themselves on fairness now hesitate to expose

progressive excesses, out of fear of being labelled reactionary, far-right, or, heaven forbid, “populist.”

In condemning the sins of bigotry, the Left has adopted them more subtly, wrapping vengeance in the language of compassion and intolerance in the guise of justice. What started as a plea for inclusion has hardened into a religion of exclusion, held up not by reason but by ritualistic outrage.

The real danger, however, isn't found in angry slogans, silly lawn signs, or broken statues, but in the slow decay of conscience. For when language is twisted to serve power and righteousness turns into performative acts, the moral imagination shrinks, leaving only a hollow echo of a moral order that once gave life its meaning.

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