

The Rise of Totalitarianism: Banks Denying Services Based on Political Views



by Theodore Dalrymple

When the Berlin Wall fell, I naively supposed that freedom was now secure, that never again would the spectre of totalitarianism return to Europe. I failed to take into account what I should have known, that the thirst for power is at least as great as that for freedom. Freedom and power are forever locked into a kind of Manichaeian struggle, as are good and evil, and the thirst for power is perfectly capable of making an instrument of supposed good causes.

History doesn't repeat itself, at least not in precisely the same way. The new totalitarianism doesn't resort to thugs in the street and the midnight knock on the door. It's somewhat

more subtle than that, but nonetheless ruthless and dangerous for all its subtlety.

In Britain, a well-known politician, Nigel Farage, has had his bank account closed by a bank called Coutts that specializes in rich clients. It's owned by the much larger National Westminster Bank, whose largest single shareholder by far, since the banking crisis of 2008, is the British government.

Mr. Farage is a well-known figure, the scourge of the Euro-federalists, and probably more responsible than any other single person for the referendum vote in 2016 for Britain to leave the European Union. Like most public figures with both strong opinions and a strong personality, Mr. Farage is both widely admired and widely detested. If you ask someone about him, he's unlikely to answer, "On the one hand, on the other ..."

Mr. Farage has been friendly with Donald Trump and has been opposed both to the excesses of transgender ideology and to the pursuit of zero emissions. But he has done nothing illegal that so far has been revealed, and the bank admits that in his dealings with it, Mr. Farage has always been polite and correct.

When Mr. Farage first announced that Coutts had closed his account, the bank at first claimed that it was because he didn't have enough money in it and that the closure was, therefore, for purely commercial reasons. This turns out, however, not to have been so.

If the documents obtained from the bank by Mr. Farage are genuine, it proves that the bank closed his account for purely political reasons. As Mr. Farage himself said, these documents read like something from Stasi headquarters. I quote just one or two of the [statements in the documents](#) (apart from anything else the English used is a tribute to the appalling state of British secondary and tertiary education):

“Given N[igel] F[arage]’s high profile and the substantial amount of adverse press connected to him, there are significant reputational risks to the bank in being associated with him. While it is accepted that no criminal convictions have resulted, commentary and behaviours that do not align with the bank’s purpose and values have been demonstrated. ... The comments/articles [on ESG/diversity and inclusion] are not in line with our views or our purpose.”

Quoting a Guardian article, one document states: “First it was Brexit, followed by a spurt of very successful campaigning to ensure that Britain left Europe on the most stringent and self-harming terms. For a while, Nigel Farage then opposed Covid restrictions. Now, he is reviving his old hostility to action on the climate emergency.”

And referring to some of Mr. Farage’s tweets, one document states, “Opposes clamping down on ‘disinformation.’”

There are 40 pages of this stuff, which, of course, didn’t find their way into the bank’s files by themselves or by accident, but instead were the product of considerable human labor, paid for by the bank’s depositors and shareholders, including the government.

It isn’t a question of whether Mr. Farage is always right or sometimes horribly wrong; when the bank says that it “uncovered” something that he said, as if he had recorded saying it by secret microphones, it makes itself ridiculous. Not even his worst enemies, or perhaps his best friends, would accuse him of hiding his light under a bushel.

The question is whether it’s the role of a bank to examine its clients’ views and deny them service if those views don’t accord with those of the chief executive, as if the latter were indisputably true and from which it were heresy to dissent. Is a bank an inquisition?

The chief executive of the parent bank, Alison Rose, [said soon](#)

[after her appointment](#) that “tackling climate change would be a central pillar” of her work, and on the occasion of the so-called Pride month last year said that “our focus on diversity, equity and inclusion is integral to our purpose of championing the potential of people, families, and businesses.” This year, the company headquarters were covered in the rainbow colors of the LGBT flag, with lettering the height of humans declaring the “Championing the power of Pride.” Under her leadership, staff may “identify” as women and men on alternate days, should they so wish.

Of course, when she said that “diversity” and “inclusion” was “integral to our purpose,” she was using these terms in a strictly technical sense to mean “everyone who thinks as I do and has a fair bit of money.” The diversity “integral” to the “purpose” of Coutts doesn’t include those persons with less than \$1 million to deposit, who even in these days of currency depreciation remain a small minority. People bank with Coutts because it’s exclusive, not inclusive.

The chief executive, however, is safely within what we might call the Coutts Community, because she was paid about \$5.2 million last year. The prospect of being barred from the bank will no doubt inhibit anyone who banks with her banks from suggesting in public that she’s paid too much.

Even more alarming, perhaps, than the initial closure of Mr. Farage’s account on political grounds, which might have been the decision of an individual zealot and his or her apparatchiks, is that (according to him) 10 other banks, acting as a kind of inquisitional cartel, have refused to open accounts for him. Many of these banks will no doubt have been fined in the past for dishonest and large-scale illegal practices, but the one thing they will not tolerate is freedom of opinion.

We used to look with horror on the KGB (the Soviet Union), the Stasi (East Germany), the Securitate (Romania), the Sigurimi

(Albania), and so forth, but now we find versions of them—as yet pale versions, it’s true—among us, giving to life a constant undercurrent of fear. As the police caution used to put it after the arrest of a suspected criminal, “You don’t have to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence against you.”

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