index on censorship | SAGE

Denis MacShane on Thomas Paine

Nigel Warburton: *Denis MacShane is a former MP, and has been a vocal supporter of libel reform. In this interview, recorded before he left Parliament, I asked him to choose a free speech icon, someone whose life highlights the importance of free expression.*

Nigel Warburton: *Denis MacShane, welcome to Free Speech Bites.*

Denis Macshane: Great to be with you, great to be doing anything with Index on Censorship.

Nigel Warburton: Now, who is your free speech icon?

Denis Macshane: I've got many, mainly great journalists and writers: Voltaire perhaps, but I want to focus on Thomas Paine because he was the original Euro-Atlanticist. He straddled both America and France, and of course his own country - he was a Thetford lad - England. He's born in the middle of the 18th century. It's always important, I think, when you want to be involved in great world events to be of the right age. So, as a young man he floats off to America to make his way, to perhaps find his fortune, but he finds himself deep in the American revolutionary movement, and clearly he's just a wonderful born agitator and writer - one thinks, in these days, maybe of somebody like Michael Foot as a politician or Christopher Hitchens as a writer and journalist and engaged political activist - and Paine was there, and he just had the gift of looking for words, and finding them, and putting them into marvellous shape and sense. And so, undoubtedly, his great pamphlet Common Sense was one of the contributing books, start books, of the American Revolution, explaining why what they were doing made sense: and the art of successful political transformation is not to call people to go die on the barricades, or to climb Mount Everest without oxygen, it's just to say what you're doing makes sense, strip away the veils of, not so much lies, but just the veils of belief that stop something happening and being done: and that's what Thomas Paine did. He showed by taking on the British establishment, taking on the British state, taking on the equivalents of the Rupert Murdoch's and the David Cameron's of the day, that powerful words could move mountains and help give birth to the United States of America.

To be close to one great social change in a person's lifetime - and I was involved with South African trade unions getting rid of apartheid, Solidarity in Poland, I was put in prison by the Communists for helping to dismantle a Soviet bloc, that's terrific - but this guy is at the heart of the American Revolution, and then he's at the heart of the French Revolution, and I doubt that there's been an Englishman in the entire history of the English race (whatever that means), who has been so central to such monumental historic change, and contributing to it, not just a witness, but actually writing the words that help take that change forward.

Nigel Warburton*: Unlike many radicals today in England, he was at severe risk for*

his life because of what he was writing.

Denis MacShane: Very much so. They didn't like him in England. He goes to France, and there's a big political battle over the nature of the French Revolution: is it a good thing, is it a bad thing? 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven' wrote the young William Wordsworth as he looked at this epochal change in Europe, the king being deposed and a republic being created. Then along comes a crusty old Conservative - they're always there, you can't keep them out of the woodwork, they come shooting out - Edmund Burke, brilliant writer, great, great parliamentarian, and he writes Reflections on the French Revolution which is a huge dump on it - it's like reading all your worst articles about immigrants or Europe in the Daily Mail, or the Telegraph or The Sun. There were some powerful arguments - the French Revolution did take a very sad, bad turn when they started chopping off lots of people's heads and introduced the terror and produced the first justification of what we later call terrorism - but, in the initial period there is Paine writing from France, explaining why this was a good thing, that kings should quake on their thrones, that men and women didn't need to live under the subjection of an aristocracy or a monarch and could form their own governments. And the British hated him for it. Straight away, of course, he fell foul of our wonderful libel laws. He is sued for seditious libel and sentenced to huge terms of imprisonment in absentia, because he's in France and he wasn't coming back for the pleasure of m'learned friends and the judges and all the rest of it who wanted to lock him up for years and throw away the keys, and then he writes The Rights of Man, probably his greatest book, extraordinary book, again in English because he's in France, he's even elected to the National Assembly without speaking a word of French, which is extraordinary, but that was the puissance of Paine's name; and then of course, he falls foul of the French, because whatever happens, revolutions devour their children, and almost anybody who stands up for freedom of expression, whether it's Galileo, whether it's Spinoza, whether it's Voltaire, or in modern times in China in Zu Xiaomei, Liu Xiaobo, whether it's in Africa, any tyrannical disposition or even a state that doesn't recognise the importance of letting free thought flourish. You always end up falling foul of your own friends, so it's touch and go with Robespierre, whether he goes first or he gets Tom Paine's head chopped off first. So, quite sensibly, Tom scarpers for America where he then upsets everybody by doing a Richard Dawkins, or a Christopher Hitchens, by saying 'God doesn't exist'. Oh boy! I mean, how many enemies do you want to make in one lifetime? And there is Paine writing pamphlets and books that say you can organise society more fairly, there should be a guaranteed living wage or minimum income for everybody in society, it's quite possible to do it, if for more equality, you don't have to take orders from priests, from established religions and Christianity; in those days it would be different Christian religions or Islam or, I suppose for some Jewish people, Judaism. Today, they're there, of course, but they shouldn't control our lives, I mean in a sense he was the original, or one of the early Christianphobes, if that's the right word - directly, I think, you can draw a line between him and Christopher Hitchens last great book, or his autobiography, then falling ill and dying sadly, (and of course Christopher is one of my dearest friends from university days, and we did a lot of journalism and activism together). Christopher himself wrote a marvellous book on Tom Paine and it's a shame in these rather managerial days, where politics is all about minor adjustments

that there aren't people actually ready to think 'big picture' stuff: whatever you say about Tom Paine, he was Mr. Big Picture.

Nigel Warburton: *What do you think was driving him?*

Denis MacShane: I think it's just that desire to write. You see that a bit later on with Shelley and Byron, both themselves having to leave Britain just uncertain whether their descriptions of the truly awful repression after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, culminating in Peterloo and ghastly repressive measures against freedom to speak, freedom of organisation, that it's better to be out of the country. I mean the MPs sign the death warrant of Charles I, the sensible ones scarpered to Switzerland and saw out their days there; the idiots stayed at home saying 'Well, he's dead now and it didn't quite work, now we've got a restoration we'll be left in peace'. They were left in peace: pieces of their heads stuck on spikes on the bridges over the Thames, but nonetheless, if you have that impulse to speak out, look at Liu Xiaobo, he's a Chinese human rights activist, pro-democracy campaigner, pamphleteer, was awarded the Nobel Prize last year, and he's still in a Chinese Gulag, one would think a nation would honour somebody who won the Nobel Peace Prize, but the Chinese cannot accept that people should speak their mind in their own country, and very sadly, despite huge efforts, I've never been able to get David Cameron or William Hague to pronounce Liu Xiaobo's name, either at the despatch box at the Commons, or in any public expression face-to-face with the Chinese, and it's a horribly shaming aspect of this present government. Unlike, well one's reluctant to cite a name, but Margaret Thatcher was ready to mention André Sakharov's name and support freedom under the Soviet Communist regime; but David Cameron and William Hague are so pusillanimous that they will not support freedom of expression as it's repressed under the Chinese Communist regime.

Nigel Warburton: *Since you've raised this issue of freedom of speech in relation to politics, where do you think the limits should lie, because clearly it can't be right that anything goes?*

Denis MacShane: Quite so, I was taking part in the Defamation Bill Standing Committee, this is the bill that's been through the House of Commons and now will go to the House of Lords, then come back to the House of Commons. It's quite a good bill, it reflects certainly a very effective campaign by a lot of people that pay tribute particularly to Evan Harris, and to Index on Censorship that provided a lot of the impulse for this - and it tidies up a lot of the bad anomalies in our libel system, particularly so-called 'libel tourism', the right of proper scientific investigation and journalistic commentary on scientific aspects: pharmaceutical, chemical, and other things if properly quoted, to be protected from powerful companies that want to shut you up. But, that said, there's a nagging doubt in my mind that it still protects the guys with money: it still, for an example, brings in a defence that says 'serious harm must be done'. Now, that's an interesting definition, it hands all the power to a judge. You're abolishing jury trials, and 'serious harm' is in the eyes of which beholder: there can be a lot of local cases where one needs a swift and speedy retraction or correction by local media, which doesn't damage the paper, it's embarrassing and

maybe they won't do it again, it's not about being expensive, these huge figures that used to be mentioned, and I worry that we still haven't got that quite right. It's also linked in obviously with Lord Justice Leveson's Inquiry, and getting that line right is very, very tricky. I mean I tend to be more down the American road of absolute freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment to their Constitution. That said, the United States mass-media, to say that the newspapers that are widely read, or their television, actually is much more professional and cautious than our mass-media because our sensationalist tabloids will just tell open lies about people in order to get a good headline, or to sensationalize a story. That's about the ethical practices of journalism, which again is quite tricky, but, I think, on the whole, we always err on the side of publication. I'm old enough to remember when you couldn't read Lady Chatterley's Lover - that was a crime - when you had censorship of theatre plays, when the BBC was the only broadcast channel and very, very staid; but on the other side of the equation I go a lot to East Europe, to Caucasian countries, Balkan countries where you see newspapers that are just virulently dishonest about their opponents: they are used simply as political weapons to destroy individuals, so the debate isn't around themes or policies or ideas, it's not balanced, it's just a huge dump, and that, I think, damages the notion of free speech. You've eliminated, I think, the notion of free speech on racism, or anti-Semitism, promoting paedophilia. Forty years ago, it would have been illegal, I think, to say, have discussed gay relationships openly. We've moved on, it's a constant dialectic, and certainly I mean, I don't hold with the idea that there's absolutely free speech for any racist or any extremist to propagate his ideas, I mean, I track a lot of work on anti-Semitism and some of the language used by Jews, sadly by ultra-Salafist Jihadi Islamists - not remotely by the vast bulk of the Muslim population or the Muslim intellectuals and writers - is truly horrific and needs to be very, very firmly stamped out because no one should live in their own country just a little bit frightened because they were born Jewish, or Muslim, or born black, and anything that creates an atmosphere of fear, I think, can't easily go through the sieve of absolute free speech. A related difficulty is, in the old days that would be written in green ink and sent to two or three people, now social media, the net, Twitter, I mean, I've received credible death threats because of work I've done, traced back to AOL addresses somewhere in Essex and by the time the cops find them you've run out of steam. But it's quite frightening just how the social media can propagate truly evil attacks on people's integrity, but Google and the other internet providers all throw up their hands and say 'Oh, we're only doing free speech'. No, sorry gentlemen, there are some limits.

Nigel Warburton: *In some people's eyes, amongst his contemporaries, Thomas Paine might have seemed an extremist: this is somebody who is challenging the throne, I mean he's challenging the notion of the power of a monarch, and that would have been as shocking, perhaps, as certain kinds of racism are to us.*

Denis MacShane: I think there's a difference between saying we can live differently, which is what Thomas Paine was arguing, and we don't need to accept blind authority from God or a king, and saying that black people should remain slaves in the United States forever - I'm not quite sure what his position was on that, and George Washington of course, as we know, kept slaves at his farm and lands just down on the Potomac, outside Washington at Mount Vernon. So to some extent you

have to locate everybody in his time: Voltaire, who gave us the famous defence for free speech, if he actually said it, you know, 'I may disagree with what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it', which even if he didn't say it - si non è vero è ben trovato - is a wonderful aphorism, but this guy was a roaring anti-Semite. So, I'm afraid, nobody is perfect: people are located in their time and place and if I read everything that Paine wrote and found racist comments, then, you know, I think those should be condemned, but in the end he's known and remembered and was read, not for that, but for challenging authority, and you must never, ever stop challenging authority, as Shelley said 'Freedom's flag flies against the wind', always has to. We have to go against the current, against the conventional thinking. You may get a lot of things wrong, but if you look at Paine, the reason he's still remembered today is he got so much right.

[ends]