

Rachel Withers (00:22)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through Cracky's spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics, and power. I am your temporary host, Rachel Withers, Filling in for the irreplaceable Crystal Andrews. And today I am joined by Dr. Tim Dean, the resident philosopher at the Ethics Centre, to go deeper on his recent Crikey articles. What's wrong with public executions?

And the only thing worse than liberalism is everything else. Tim, welcome to Cut Through.

Tim Dean (00:51)

Thanks for having me.

Rachel Withers (00:52)

so you wrote a brilliant piece last week on the immorality of the Trump administration's plans to live stream a death by firing squad. since you wrote that, Donald Trump has announced the execution will not be live streamed following intense backlash. So congratulations to you, Tim. just to start off, can you remind listeners what was actually initially planned here and how this perverse idea came about?

Tim Dean (01:18)

Yeah, sure.

So it starts with Nidal Hassan, who was a major in the US Army. and in two thousand and nine he opened fire on his fellow US Army soldiers at Fort Hood in Texas. He killed thirteen people, including one pregnant woman, and he injured over thirty others. and he was shot while he was being apprehended and is now in a wheelchair.

In 2013, he was found guilty and sentenced to death. He actually didn't defend himself. He chose to represent himself in this and chose not to mount a defense. And there were multiple appeals again. He chose not to mount a defense. but then on the 8th of October this year, Pete Hegseth, the so-called Secretary of War, because they've renamed the Department of Defense, the Department of War,

standing on the aircraft carrier, was announcing to some right wing media that Hassan was going to be executed by firing squad, which is a pretty old way of doing it that the military has a history of, although it hasn't done

An execution by firing squad since the Second World War. But he also announced that it was going to be made public. It was going to be live streamed so that anyone would be able to tune in.

And Pete Heggseth's justification for this was he wanted to show that, in quote, there's serious consequences for these types of things. Which to me raises an interesting question: of like, what greater consequence is there than death? Why make it public?

Rachel Withers (03:04)

a lot of people, including myself, were instinctively horrified by this announcement. this would have been the first, as you mentioned, the first firing squad death since the end of World War II and the first public execution in the US in almost a century. but many of us didn't actually stop to think about the ethics of the situation. So to quote your own article back at you.

What is it exactly about a public execution that is morally wrong?

Tim Dean (03:28)

Yeah, and I think a lot of us, like you and like me, we're kind of repulsed by this idea. There's a certain kind of element of disgust in the idea of publicly televising an execution. But when we want to go into understanding the moral dimension, there's something deeper than just our immediate emotional response because not everyone had the same response. There were some people who were quite pleased with this idea, some people who were celebrating this idea.

But when we get to the moral dimensions of it, what we want to do is really unpack.

What are the effects of this? What are the principles involved? And from my perspective, I think there are two really big moral dimensions of this.

One is that public executions corrupt the individuals who watch. There's a way that they degrade those individuals and cause a moral injury to those individuals and potentially set them up for being desensitized to violence. We can go into that a little bit more if you want.

But the other dimension, which I also think is really important and really telling in this case, is that public executions corrupt the state.

Any liberal democracy ostensibly has made a commitment to say we put violence as a last resort and we don't celebrate violence when we do enact violence, because a part of the liberal kind of contract that we have in a liberal state is that we as individuals give up our right to use violence against anyone else.

The state has a monopoly on violence, so it's the only one who really has the ability to use that violence. But it does so with great care, great oversight, great accountability, and great reluctance. So I think a public execution corrupts the state, not just in the sense that it's a death penalty, which is something I also oppose, but it corrupts the state in the sense that it goes further in normalizing the state's use of violence and celebrating that use of violence rather than signaling.

That it's like a last resort

Rachel Withers (05:23)

Well, we'll come back to that idea about the liberal state and the role of violence. but I wanted to talk a little bit more this purpose that the public execution has, and in this case that the Trump administration may have had in going about this. you write in your piece that public executions use theatre and narrative to signal something. What is it that states are trying to signal?

And

how closely did the Trump administration's rhetoric map onto that idea?

Tim Dean (05:52)

Yeah, I mean, look, the the key thing about a public execution is it's public. So if a public execution was just about punishment, even if you support the death penalty, and there are some arguments in support of the death penalty, mainly along the the idea of what's called a retributionist view, which is the idea that if someone does something wrong, we are entitled to do something wrong back to them in in punishment. If they've done something seriously wrong taking a life, we're justified in in taking their life.

Now, I don't buy into that, but some people can justify that. But if it was just about satisfying that particular view, then a private execution would satisfy the idea of punishment. There's no

Rachel Withers (06:31)

Mm.

Tim Dean (06:32)

greater thing that we can deprive someone of than their life. Now, why add this public dimension to it? And this is where a lot of scholars have talked about the role of public executions in history, going back from

Rachel Withers (06:43)

Mm.

Tim Dean (06:43)

ancient Rome and and much longer before that as well, through today.

And what they found is that it's about signaling, it's about communicating, it's about showing and demonstrating the power of the state, the willingness of the state to use violence. there's also another subtext there, which is the state is willing to use violence against its own citizens. So there's a very performative aspect to this. It's a very big part of the signaling. And other scholars have talked about how it's like a theatrical performance, there's a script.

There are rituals. There are roles that people play. There's even an assumed role of the person to be executed as like sad criminal and the martyr begging for mercy. Their powerlessness is a part of it. There are the state officials who stand around and go through the motions of doing the

execution. And then there's the role of the audience, kind of watching on. So there's a very theatrical element of that. But fundamentally the message.

In most of these cases, this was also talked about by other philosophers like Michel Foucault,

it's demonstrating the state's power over us, the state's power over the body, and the state's willingness to use violence.

Rachel Withers (07:53)

There was a quote in your piece that I thought was so succinct from an American lawyer, Stephen A. Bloom, who you quoted as saying a public execution is the ultimate act of asserting authority by terror. obviously, this execution isn't going ahead. We're having a slightly different conversation to the one we thought we might be having. But what did you make of

Trump administration's reasons for the backflip. Did you think that any of the public comments actually recognized the immorality or the threat to the liberal state that going ahead with it would have presented?

Tim Dean (08:25)

Well, I mean, it's probably not going surprise you to hear me

say that no, I didn't see this

Rachel Withers (08:29)

No.

Tim Dean (08:30)

discussion of like liberal values as a part of the rhetoric around stopping it.

Now we've got remember that what we heard, and we know that we only hear little bits and pieces that come out of the administration. There's a lot of conversations that go on behind the scenes that we're not privy to. But what we heard was that Trump initially approved this. So it wasn't that Trump was always reluctant. He initially gave it a green light.

And then what Trump came out and said, and I've got one of his quotes here, he said, many very good and well-meaning people would rather not watch him die, which was the justification that he used for canceling the public execution. We do know that a number of high profile Republicans were against it. J.D. Vance, for example, stated that he was not going to watch it. And you can't think of many more staunch Trump allies than the vice president.

So even people in his very close inner circle were opposed to it. It's possible that a number of his kind of close friends amongst his particular kind of you know elite class maybe spoke to him and spoke out. We don't know what actually motivated it, but this idea that good and well

meaning people would rather not watch him die is making a statement of preference. It's like I'd rather

Rachel Withers (10:00)

Mm-hmm.

Tim Dean (10:01)

not, there thought therefore we shouldn't, rather than making a statement of principle.

Rachel Withers (10:05)

Mm, mm.

Tim Dean (10:05)

And the statement of principle

would be something like: this is not in our character, this is not what we do. which is probably what we're going to get to, I would go far as to say that the United States under the current administration is no longer a liberal democracy. It's still a democracy in in principle. assuming that the midterms go ahead and they're clean, yeah, sure, it's still a functioning democracy. when it comes to the liberal.

When you look at the values that a liberal state upholds, things like the rule of law, things like this reluctance to use violence, things like the ideas of the principles of punishment being around correcting injustices, rehabilitating, keeping people safe, that kind of consequentialist narrative rather than just just kind of like we're gonna go out and punish people who've hurt us. We're not hearing anything like that. So I didn't hear any moral justification beyond this idea that it would just be distasteful to

Rachel Withers (10:51)

Mm.

Tim Dean (10:52)

these so-called

Very good and well meaning people.

Rachel Withers (10:54)

I feel like when there is that talk of people preferring not to see it, as you say, it's it's not talking about principles of the liberal state, but it also speaks to the fact that this would have been very difficult for most people to avoid, even if they would prefer not to watch it. the way technology has developed and the fact we have the internet and social media meant that a lot of people were gonna see it whether they wanted to or not.

I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to the role that technology has played in changing public executions and how it might have changed the ethics of this situation.

Tim Dean (11:29)

Yeah, social media and technology have changed it. In historical terms, public executions were typically done in place, and people would travel to the place. And there are a lot of to to the modern year, pretty kind of disturbing accounts of these like festive attitudes, these circus attitudes as they sometimes have been described, of people gathering to see a public execution. But like a play, it was a temporal thing. It was there and it was gone.

So the only people who were really confronted by it were those who chose to turn up. When we look at the way technology can broadcast and be shared and the way the video can persist forever, potentially, then it really does change things. It pushes the vision further afield. Instead of sending a signal now just to the people in that particular state, it's sending a statement to people around the world of what kind of state we are and our attitude towards violence.

it's also like you said, it's it's gonna be difficult to avoid, depending on how chronically online you are. You're likely to come across it somewhere. Someone's gonna be talking about it. There are gonna be links, it's going to be available. Even if you choose not to watch it, it's going to be there. And one of the things I think we need to recognize as well is a species, we are fascinated by violence.

We have a deep evolutionary interest in this idea of violence and bodily autonomy and the fear of violence and this kind of revulsion, but also this this this rapt attack attention that we place upon it. And that's because our species is a violent species.

There's also this idea that we have this heightened alertness around violence and we want to focus on sources of violence. So is if there's violence around, we become aroused and worried. Is this a threat to us? And even if it's mediated through a screen, we're still drawn to it. So many people who may not want to see it may still find themselves drawn towards seeing it. And because the barrier to watch is so low when we talk about modern technology, it's very easy for people to then slip into it. We've seen this recently, like with

Shark attack videos. I mean, our

Rachel Withers (13:34)

Mm.

Tim Dean (13:34)

interest in violence is we get a lot of high-profile shark attack stories. We don't get a lot of high-profile people dying of infection stories because that happens

Rachel Withers (13:42)

Mm.

Tim Dean (13:42)

in hospitals and it's pretty common. But I've heard of people who have watched footage of shark attacks because they were drawn to it, but then they have found themselves really traumatized by that as well.

And the fact that the video could last forever, the fact that people could use it to fuel engagement.

this means that it's likely to to be visible for quite some time.

Rachel Withers (14:04)

we can be thankful that presumably it's not going to be live streamed. Let's go back to liberalism. you've written another excellent piece for Crikey this week about the ongoing threats to liberalism. This is just one of them, but also about what disasters a post-liberal world might entail. So what are some of the other threats to liberalism and where are they coming from?

Tim Dean (14:25)

Yeah, liberalism, which is the foundation of the civilization that or the societies that we live in, at least in in modern liberal democracies around around the world, it's kind of invisible to us. We don't really think about all these principles. It's it's kind of very abstract, it's very philosophical, like you know, wonky people like me are really interested in it, but not everybody is thinking about, yeah, rule of law. What does that mean? When does it you know, but but these things are really, really important and they are under threat.

From a two from a couple of different sides.

So on one side, on the left, there has been an attack on some liberal principles around openness, tolerance, and free speech. There has been shift in discourse from certain at elements of the left towards a kind of moral purity discourse. Now, where the left in the 70s and 80s would be much more interested in promoting a tolerance and diversity, be fearful of

Kind of one moral discourse oppressing the voices of others, there's been a greater awareness of the of the injure that speech can do. Now, liberalism says that free speech should be the place where we play out ideas and we tackle these ideas together and the marketplace of ideas. And it's never really existed because certain voices have always been more marginalized. Power is a really important part of that. But in responding to the power, we are seeing the suppression of speech, a crusade for moral purity on on

one side. But I think a much greater threat is coming from the right.

And when the right looks at liberalism, the right is perturbed by things like tolerance and multiculturalism as well. The idea that a lot of individuals in the narrative on the right speaks to a

time when society was more homogeneous, when everyone had the same values, had the same culture, the same background.

And it excluded those who were different. And there's a desire to return to that. There's a feel of threat that multiculturalism is destabilizing.

Now we do have abundant research showing that greater diversity within a population like somewhere like Australia can be unsettling for a lot of people. A lot of norms and traditions and expectations and the our ex experience of the neighborhood changes over time. People can feel alienated from that. With technology meaning people are moving into their homes.

With then neoliberalism adding on to that, focusing on wealth creation at the expense of workers, at the expense of meaningful jobs. So there's a lot of pushback on the right to return to a kind of a world where there was a more simple vision of culture. I was a part of that in-group, they were looking after me, those out-groups, we don't really want them in here. and a return to a kind of a state.

That was more prescriptive in terms of the kind of lives that we should be living. And we're seeing this in some countries, like in Hungary under Uban's administration.

There's a philosopher at Sydney University, Alex Lafabre, who's done some really wonderful work looking at these non-liberal states and how they appeal to that kind of a vision. But that undermines the idea that institutions are important, that equality is important, that the rule of law is important.

some on the right wanna return to like a a strong leader. There's been a lot of interesting studies showing that about 20-30% of people, and this has kind of been the same over many, many decades, 20 or 30% of people just aren't that invested in the idea of democracy at all. They would rather see a strong leader control the state and push out the perceived enemies.

I think a lot of those kinds of things, and we're seeing a lot of this in the US, the undermining of institutions, the undermining of the courts, increased corruption.

all of those things undermine these really core fundamental liberal values.

Rachel Withers (18:06)

I'm really interested in the attacks on the on liberalism from the left, shall we say? I think there's a lot of sneering at liberalism these days. I think it has a fairly bad reputation but also has plenty of well-meaning critics, yourself included. What are your concerns with liberalism? And why do you argue in this piece that it must be saved anyway?

Tim Dean (18:28)

any self-hating liberal like me would think that liberalism has a lot of problems, but it still deserves to be saved.

So some of the problems I'm really interested in human nature. That's been one of the core areas of my work in philosophy, is understanding human nature from a social and a moral perspective. And I think liberalism, with its focus on the individual, can overlook some of the importance of our social identity and the need

For community connections and meaning and shared meaning and giving up some of our autonomy to belong to a group that is larger than us. I think that is a legitimate concern.

I think neoliberalism has also gone too far. Liberalism is often connected with the idea of a free market, and there's a part of the freedom story there that connects the two. But neoliberalism has really leaned into a mechanistic view and an instrumental view of humans as a form of labor.

And so one of the things that we see with neoliberalism is not only is a devaluing of labor versus capital, we see a devaluing of traditional social roles that were really important. So in pre-liberal societies, people who held the role of being like a teacher, for example, or a healer, they were valued for the role that they played within their community, not just for the economic value that they could generate. and so now we see people in healthcare and people in education being underpaid because it's really hard

For neoliberalism to internalize the wealth generation, all the all this kind of stuff. But we also see things like neoliberalism says move to where the jobs are. If you're in a place where your jobs are disappearing, just move to a different place and get a different job somewhere else, which underplays the importance of the roots that we have in our communities and how disruptive that can be. And it really instrumentalizes humans.

I also agree with this criticism of the marketplace of ideas. Now, I firmly believe that it's really important that speech is the first vehicle for us to resolve our differences. And force should be very, very low on the list of us trying to resolve our differences. But I'm not completely permissive of free speech. I'm not a free speech absolutist. There are certainly places where we do need to control and limit speech that can be harmful. I don't think I don't know any philosophers who are free speech absolutists. I only know

social media moguls who are. So look, I I'm critical of liberalism in in some of those dimensions, but when we look at post-liberalism, and I actually really don't like the term post-liberalism, because post implies a progressiveness, an after liberalism. And in a sense it is whatever comes after liberalism is post, but it's not going to be progressive. I actually think post liberalism liberalism could look a lot like pre-liberalism.

It could look a lot like where nations are fending for themselves. There's less interest in things like the rule of law. People are oppressed if you do not fall in with the views of the state. There's greater corruption. There can be like a two-tier system, depending on whether you're in the in-group or the out-group. And then states will also conflict with each other. So for a lot of

history, states were being invaded and colonized constantly for the last couple of thousand years.

Very few people could feel safe that over their lifetime there was not going to be some kind of threat from a neighboring group, whether that's a neighboring tribe, city, state, or nation or empire. And that's kind of where we are returning to. Scholars call it the long peace since the Second World War. Now, of course, there have been lots of wars since then, but there have been relatively few major wars, there have been relatively few invasions of neighboring countries by liberal democracies against other liberal democracies.

Now, a lot of that has been thrown into disarray recently, particularly with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which was really very much like what we should expect from a pre-liberal, post-liberal, non-liberal kind of world. We could expect to lose our freedoms, we could expect to lose the rule of law, we could expect to lose a tolerance and an openness and a greater willingness to use force, coercion, and violence.

whether that's against people within our own state or against people in other states. And I think this is really important because states evolve, politics evolves, it evolves to kind of fit what works. And when an elite gets power, it really works to entrench that power. And when an elite really wants power, it doesn't want liberalism because liberalism tries to distribute the power to the people. And once you lose it, it can be really hard to get it back. The reason that we live in a liberal

at least in the the kind of the West, the so-called West these days, is living by liberal standards is only because of a couple of really freakish historical things. I don't need to go into them too much, but one of them was there's some really interesting scholarship on how the Catholic Church broke down familial relationships, where instead of people having loyalty to their family or their tribe, they had loyalty to a church. Breaking that meant that you could replace that church over time as Protestantism did with

the state and people had

an allegiance to a much greater, broader, more diverse group of people. And we get we got more peace through that.

And then through things like the Thirty Years' War, which was a terrible religious war, which was really hashing out this tension, the visibility of that horror really forced people to say we need to do things a different way. So if we lose these kind of liberal norms today and these liberal values today?

And I know it sounds apocalyptic, but I do think things could slide that way. I worry what it would take for us to get those back, whether it would take similarly terrifying and bloody wars to restore liberalism to the dominant

Rachel Withers (24:08)

Mm.

Tim Dean (24:08)

system in our society.

Rachel Withers (24:09)

Mm. I'm I'm really hearing both in your piece and hearing you talk that it's not so much that liberalism is great, but it's that everything that's not liberalism is probably bad. I don't think many of those on the right who are advocating for post-liberalism are listening to Cut Through or reading Crikey. But I do feel like you have a message in here specifically for post-liberals on the left.

What is your message to those people who maybe they don't in so many words want to get rid of liberalism but who are advocating to overthrow the system that we have?

Tim Dean (24:45)

Yeah, look, I and I don't want to overstate it too much, but I do want to say be careful what you wish for. Because if, for example, there's a particular moral view that you believe is right and you really push for that, that's okay. But a part of the liberal world requires us to tolerate. And tolerance doesn't mean agreement and it doesn't mean conciliation. It means tolerance. I recognize and I disagree with what you say, but I am going to tolerate you doing that. That

View of tolerance, I think, is really crucial. what I perceive is often a dismissing of grievances expressed by people from a range of different political points of view. People are complaining about feeling unmoored or unsettled, they're troubled, they feel under pressure, they feel left behind, they feel like this big grand bargain of society has kind of left them out.

And

What I find is sometimes, particularly people who are leaning towards populist right parties, they feel unsettled and they give a cause as to why I'm feeling unsettled. And often the cause that they give is wrong. They may be blaming immigration for what really they should be blaming on something like neoliberalism. And because their argument and their reason is wrong, their grievances are sometimes dismissed. What I think we need to do, everybody.

on the left and the right, but you know particularly on the left, is we need to really listen to and understand, recognize and acknowledge the way people feel and the grievances that they have, even if we don't agree with their particular cause, and try to understand what really is causing their grievance. What can we do about that? when we talk about multiculturalism, for example, for the last few decades,

one of the narratives that's come out about multiculturalism has been that it's always a good thing. That it's any kind of criticism of multiculturalism is perceived to be racist. Now there are

plenty of racist criticisms of multiculturalism, but I don't think every criticism of multiculturalism is necessarily racist. Multiculturalism in an unmanaged way can unfold in lots of different ways. One of those ways can be immigrant groups can kind of clump together.

And become relatively isolationist where they don't necessarily have a lot of bridging. So the the American sociologist Robert Putnam talks about social capital, the binds, the social glue, the trust and respect that we have within communities. And he he shows that when these communities can kind of clump apart, we lose what's called bridging capital, the ability to bridge these groups together. So I think there has been a failure to some degree in recognizing the importance of building.

institutions and practices and norms and the state can be involved in that, in bridging these communities. It's not assimilation. It's a way of blending together over a common shared set of norms, allowing a lot of distinctiveness together. That's just one example where conversations about that. Now I might be wrong about that, but the to have a conversation about that is a way that we can address and recognize and validate the feelings that people have and the grievances that they have.

Without necessarily buying into their particular narratives about what is causing it. The other thing that

Rachel Withers (27:59)  
Mm.

Tim Dean (27:59)  
I think is really important is to recognize that liberalism actually runs against our human nature. I talked about human nature before, it's something I'm really interested in. We're not naturally tolerant species. We're not naturally open to diversity. For most of our species history, our ancestors lived in small, homogeneous communities where everything looked the same, everyone sounded the same.

They were born, lived, and died in the same moral world. There was very little change. And there's a part of a lot of us that wants that, expects that from the world. Liberalism says that no, we can't expect that. So, some to some degree, we need to push back on our own nature. And that's where we need to teach.

We don't teach the things that are natural. We teach the things that are difficult, that are hard. And one of the things that I think we need to teach is I mean, civics is a bit of a

a fluff way to put it, but I do think teaching things like discourse, teaching things like public engagement, teaching how to argue, how to structure things. I mean you're talking to a philosopher, of course of course I'm gonna say we should be teaching philosophy

Rachel Withers (28:56)

Mm-hmm.

Tim Dean (28:57)

and critical thinking and ethics, ethical reasoning in school. so there are these two dimensions. One is I think we need to make sure that we're not undermining the institutions that might be a bit of a compromise, but might

help us get along with each other in peace and accept some compromises around tolerating things we disagree with. But I think we also need to work on ourselves in each other and train ourselves up, model behavior that shows constructive engagement, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning rather than just pushing like we s we open, talking about the way we feel about things, the preferences

Rachel Withers (29:32)

Mm.

Tim Dean (29:33)

that we have. That's not a moral response. A moral response is something where we draw upon principles and values.

and engage with them in a really really crunchy way.

Rachel Withers (29:42)

It strikes me in a lot of that, talking about the need to to recognize grievances without necessarily accepting the reasoning for them. feels like a lot of the onus to save or or preserve or protect liberalism, it seems you are placing on the left to not capitulate, but to

ameliorate some of the rights concerns when they are the ones in many ways advocating for an end to liberalism. How does that how do we square that circle?

Tim Dean (30:12)

Yeah, look, I mean, you did ask me about the left. If were you to ask me about what the right would do, if

Rachel Withers (30:15)

Yeah. yes, I do.

Tim Dean (30:17)

they happen to be listening, look, I would say the same things as well. to the right, the right has a lot of work to do. I think the right is perhaps a little giddy at the idea of eroding some of these liberal norms, because if they feel as though they are going to be the in group that is protected by the powerful state, then they feel like they have something to win. But

History shows that whatever that in is likely to become an outgroup at some point and they're likely to be repressed.

so I think that the right needs to be very, very careful about what it wishes for as well. And I think those on the right need to think carefully about engaging with other voices as well and having some openness and tolerance and and critical engagement. I know that's a high bar, but this is something that I think is a universal.

Thing. So the right needs to do a little bit more work as well to understand what's actually causing the problems that it is perceiving and not just fall onto easy tropes like, it's all about immigration, it's all about elites, it's all about, you know, scientific conspiracies or something like that. So one of the things that I promote is good faith. So good faith is the idea that we speak and act with good intention and with intellectual humility. Now I know how hard that is.

A lot of work that I do, whether that's workshops for business and government or in schools, is trying to teach and model good faith because it's not always that easy to do. Everybody needs to get better at exercising good faith. I don't think one side or the other has a responsibility to do more or less heavy lifting. But if one side sees the other acting more in bad faith, then acting in bad faith in return is not going to make things any better.

So it really does require us to kind of cut the shit and be serious about how we engage with the world ethically, continue to argue and fight the fights that we think are worth fighting for, but do so in ways that do not undermine our ability to fight those fights again in the future by taking away things like free speech or openness or tolerance or the rule of law or a fundamental belief in equality or a fundamental belief that

Argumentation and engagement and discourse, as difficult as that is, is better than coercion, and coercion is better than violence.

Rachel Withers (32:31)

do we need more than just a sort of civic debate, an improvement to the way we debate things as a society? Is it that for liberalism to survive, neoliberalism needs to be wound back a bit

Tim Dean (32:44)

If I had a flag I'd be waving it right now. Hundred percent.

Rachel Withers (32:46)

Okay.

Tim Dean (32:46)

I think neoliberalism is one of the most corrosive forces in society at the moment. for so many different reasons. Like I think this idea of the instrumental instrumentalization of people as just units of labor is perverse. I think the stripping of meaning from work is really perverse. I think the

idea that capital, as we know, capital grows faster than labor, causing, you know, an accumulation of wealth.

at the top and a stripping of wealth from the bottom, I think that is perverse. I think the idea that, and I work with a lot of businesses and organizations to help them make ethical decisions. And what's interesting is a lot of the times they could do something that's completely legal, but they are kind of worried about doing that because it feels a bit wrong. And we talk about the ethics of it, and they're like, Yeah, we don't want to buy from this particular supplier overseas because we don't endorse those particular labor practices. But the very fact that it is legal.

To earn a profit doing things that we know and would generally agree are harmful to people, I think is a fundamental failure of the current economic system. And this feeling of insecurity that people get from cost of living pressures, from feeling job insecurity, from feeling the world is moving too fast, from seeing inequality. Inequality is a relative thing when we see that there are some people living really, really high lives and where we don't feel like we can achieve that.

All of that feeds into a feeling of instability and insecurity, which then people seek an answer for. And that's where they're moving to things like explanations like immigration. They're moving to things like the wrong, they're challenging the wrong kinds of elites, they're challenging the courts, or they're challenging science. So absolutely neoliberalism is something that we need to revise radically and

Rachel Withers (34:31)  
Mm-hmm.

Tim Dean (34:31)  
very soon.

Rachel Withers (34:32)  
More ethics, more civics, less neoliberalism. you write at the end of your piece on liberalism that we need to do the unsexy work of making liberalism sexy again. How on earth do we make liberalism sexy?

Tim Dean (34:45)  
I wish I knew. I really wish I knew. I know, I know,

Rachel Withers (34:47)  
Yeah, it's pretty unfair to do that to your closing line, which

Tim Dean (34:51)  
I know. I chuckled that in there hoping someone else would be like, here's an idea. I don't know really

Rachel Withers (34:54)

Ha ha ha

Tim Dean (34:55)

how to do it. And I'm also Alex Lafabre, the philosopher at Sydney University, he speaks about this as well. I wish we did know how to do that. I mean, you are talking to a philosopher, someone who has studied perhaps one of the least sexy you know, fields of study.

But I do think we need to what I'm talking about is we need to get a little bit enthused about liberalism. And it is a bit staid and abstract. it it's like we're swimming in the water of liberalism so much we don't even realize that it's there. And when we describe what a non-liberal state looks like, it it is actually pretty uncomfortable. Like for most of history, you didn't get to choose your job. You did what either your parents told you to do or your community required, whether you liked it, whether you were good at it.

and and if we don't want that kind of thing, you married who your family told you to marry, you know. you had children not because you wanted them, but because there was an expectation that was put upon you. You followed a particular creed or religion because it w you were born into it, not because you got to choose. All of those things I think can fire people up if they think about what that world looks like. I I mean, you look at Handmaid's Tale, for example, and people get very fired up by that. because it makes really visible what is gone.

So some of this is maybe to kind of not only see what is gone, but come back to celebrate some of that. now my natural habitat is the seminar room. That's probably not the best place to be doing that. But I do push that out to people. If you've got an idea of how to reinvigorate this, I think we do need that quite urgently. I'm open to ideas.

Rachel Withers (36:20)

Well, as someone who kept falling asleep trying to read a certain quarterly essay on liberalism, but who very much enjoyed your piece in Crikey, I think you've made a bit of a start and hopefully this podcast has at least ignited the conversation about liberalism for a few more people. So thank you so much, Tim Dean.

Tim Dean (36:38)

it's been a pleasure. Thanks for having me on.