

How liberals in the West forgot what liberalism is

By Sholto Byrnes



People wave Turkish national flags during a demonstration near the Turkish consulate in Rotterdam. Marten van Dijk / AFP Photo

Little, on the surface of it, may appear to connect the Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, with Charles Murray, an elderly American political theorist with bracingly – some would say offensively – right wing views.

What has linked them in the past few weeks, however, have been instances of a disturbing trend to shut down free speech.

Their cases are very different. Mr Cavusoglu has been banned from speaking at rallies of Turks in Germany and the Netherlands at which he hoped to win the votes of his expatriate countrymen for April's referendum on creating an empowered executive presidency in Turkey. It may be said that the authorities in those countries were at liberty to ban foreign politicians campaigning; but such activities are not unusual.

Barack Obama, no less, campaigned for the "remain" side in the run up to the Brexit vote when he warned that Britain would be at "the back of the queue" for trade deals if the country voted to leave the EU. And while Germany and Holland have barred him, Mr Cavusoglu was allowed to address a rally in France and the Swiss authorities said he was free to do so there too.

Mr Murray, on the other hand, was shouted down by pupils at Middlebury, when he attempted to speak at the liberal arts college in Vermont. After moving to another room, Mr Murray and a college professor were trying to leave when the protests turned ugly.

Allison Stanger, the professor, tried to shield her visitor from the student mob, but her hair was yanked back so violently that she had to go to hospital. She is still wearing a neck brace and had to spend a week in a dark room recovering from concussion from the whiplash she suffered.

So yes, two very different cases, but both, I would argue, fit a rising phenomenon of a new illiberal liberalism that betrays the tolerance that ought to be at its very heart.

This is not to speak in favour of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP government, nor of the referendum which he is hoping to win. Even Turkey's opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has opposed the ban. He criticised Germany for being hypocritical, saying: "You teach democracy to the world, but you forbid two ministers from speaking with this or that excuse."

Neither is it to support Charles Murray. I find some of his writings highly objectionable, and I have attacked him in the past for wanting to revive the stigma attached to illegitimacy.

But I can find no good reason why Western European countries who preach the values of liberal democracy and free speech should restrict foreign politicians coming to their countries to debate with voters who happen to live in those countries. Banning people from entering or speaking should only happen in extreme cases, and when the person wishing to enter is likely to cause a breach of the peace or break the law – and there is no suggestion that Turkey's foreign minister was going to do anything of the sort.

Likewise, despite my dislike of Mr Murray's theories, I would fully endorse him coming to speak at a university – a place where those opposed to him should be able to demonstrate their intellect by arguing against him and winning by force of ideas and debate. Most certainly not through violence and intimidation.

So many of these new "liberals" seem to have forgotten what liberalism is about.

Central to liberalism is an anti-collectivism, an anti-conformity that says opposing views not only have every right to be heard, but indeed must be heard (not least because you are not entirely secure in your own case until you can argue cogently what is wrong with your opponents' case).

This shutting down of the debate before it's even happened, the trend for the ridiculous nonsense of "no-platforming" and the like, is absolutely illiberal.

It may be worth reminding these so-called liberals of the well worn but still resonant words attributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Now it may be said that there are always limits to freedom of speech. I agree. It is up to every society to decide where to place the bar, and which beliefs or subjects should be provided with special protection – most obviously, it is the settled will of many peoples that religion falls into that category.

Western societies do not, however, need to be protected from a minister of a democratically elected government – and a Nato ally – making political appeals to citizens resident in Europe.

The principle of "no political speeches abroad" is clearly non-existent.

For does anyone think that Britain would ban Francois Fillon from speaking in London, which has so many French citizens living there that it is sometimes referred to as France's sixth biggest city?

The truth is that Germany and the Netherlands simply don't want Turkish politicians, just as the students at Middlebury didn't want to hear Mr Murray.

That may be their right. But they should not pretend their reasons for declaring such discussions off limits have anything to do with the liberalism they profess, which could never condone the closure of ears and minds.

Liberalism is under siege in many parts of the world. It would be a terrible irony if those who help smother it were the very countries and institutions that were supposed to be its most ardent defenders.

Sholto Byrnes is a senior fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia