

On civility

A member article



DR JOSH FERGEUS

4 MAR 2023



14



46



Share



'Let Oakland be a city of civility', by Nick Doty, licensed under CC BY 2.0 (cropped).

You may have observed that, within the Party, calls for respectful debate are increasingly labelled 'civility politics'. Presumably the claim of those applying the label is that calling for them to engage in a respectful manner is seeking to silence them and, in doing so, effectively remove them from debate. This claim is not without merit. Calls for civility in political debate have long been identified as a potential means for social control.¹ We see this tactic regularly deployed by commentators decrying the actions of environmental protesters, for example. The

strategic incivility sometimes deployed by activists in protests and demonstrations is called unreasonable, selfish, rude and even dangerous.² Such critics argue that environmentalists should sit quietly in polite protest while we wait for the world to realise the urgency of climate action. There are instances where strategic incivility – for example, many forms of passive resistance – may be necessary in our engagement with society. History provides us with many examples. To take two: when Extinction Rebellion protesters drenched themselves in fake blood outside a London Fashion Week event, or when Paul Robert Cohen wore a jacket bearing the words ‘fuck the draft’ in a courthouse.

So, that much can be conceded. But the Australian Greens Victoria is not society at large. Citizens are not drafted as members of the Party. No person is compelled to adhere to the Australian Greens Charter. Instead, the Party is an organisation of generally like-minded people who voluntarily come together to achieve an explicit list of common purposes which are set out in and governed by our **Constitution**. In order to achieve those purposes, we require an understanding of and adherence to agreed norms of discourse.

Civility defines the kinds of behaviours we can rightfully expect from others such as respect, politeness and a degree of consideration. Our expectations will differ between circumstances. Certain behaviours that are considered uncivil in a cafe are expected at a football match. Within the Party, it has become unclear what civility is, and thus what constitutes normative interpersonal conduct among members. Indeed, it may not be accepted by all members that civility has any value at all. This is deeply concerning, as an acceptance of incivility in our interpersonal interactions is inconsistent with our functioning as a deliberative and productive organisation. Our members who hold public office often decry the behaviour of their colleagues during Council meetings or Question Time. They do this because they recognise that, in order for councils and parliaments to function properly, a commitment to a certain level of civil behaviour is necessary. This is even more critical within the Party as we seek to advance our common cause through the use of consensus decision-making.

The protocols of desirable behaviour differ from organisation to organisation. Within the Party, we have few explicit protocols. Apart from the **Code of Conduct**, members have limited guidance available as to what constitutes positive and desirable behaviour for the average Party member. The Code does include certain positive obligations on members, for example members must ‘in all of their dealings as a

member' show 'goodwill and respect'. However, rightly or wrongly, the absence of this behaviour is mostly understood as the presence of behaviour explicitly prohibited under the Code, for example vilification or harassment. To find that one member has harassed another requires, as it should, a reasonably high threshold to be met. This necessarily means that there is a great deal of behaviour which falls short of the positive obligations but does not meet the threshold for a finding of a breach of one of the prohibitions. To navigate what is acceptable in this grey area, members may fall back on their personal or professional experience to establish what they believe constitutes acceptable behaviour. But given the variety of training, expertise and lived experience among the membership, this is unlikely to consistently result in common ground. For example, what is considered acceptable when working in a pub is different to what is considered acceptable when working in a courtroom. A member might turn to our members who hold public office or to State Councillors for an example, consciously or otherwise. It is therefore critical that senior members of the Party model desirable behaviour.

I am not arguing for the silencing of genuine difference, nor for intolerance of occasional outbursts of emotion. But, when minor examples of incivility are ignored or permitted to pass, more significant and counterproductive behaviours tend to follow.³ More concerning still, such behaviour has been shown to often be contagious.⁴ Instances of incivility ignored can be interpreted as tacit endorsement of the behaviour, particularly where the target of this incivility is said to have 'asked for it' because whatever they have said or done is taken to have invited or provoked the uncivil response. In my view, this 'both sides' analysis improperly tends to legitimise incivility within the Party and grant uncivil speech equal status with reasoned debate and good-faith efforts to achieve consensus. It can even lead to incivility being deployed as a political tactic, where one member or group of members creates a hostile environment for those who would otherwise wish to express their disagreement. This is, in itself, an example of silencing political dissent, and is poison to an organisation that values and practises consensus decision-making.

Unfortunately, attempts to identify and regulate incivility within the Party are often erroneously labelled 'tone policing'. The dictionary definition of tone policing is a myopic focus on the alleged 'tone' adopted by a participant in a debate while ignoring the substance of their argument. This tactic is well known to long-term adherents of the left, having been regularly weaponised by the reactionary right

during civil rights struggles, including against feminists and people of colour. Of course, this does not mean that all concerns raised about the tenor of a conversation or debate are unreasonable. But if we accept that within the Party we are, as it were, 'on the same side' then we must assume that internal concerns expressed regarding civility are genuine and intended to improve our ability to work together productively and to reach consensus. At present this seems to be contentious, contributing to even greater and more frequent displays of incivility. We know that people's assessment of the behaviour of others often correlates with their particular political views or allegiances.⁵ We are more likely to approve of the behaviour of people we generally agree with than those we do not. As hard as it may be, it is incumbent on all party members to reflect on what we truly consider to be acceptable behaviour and why we hold those views.

The bottom line is that the primary dimensions of civility, such as a degree of politeness, are critical to achieving our shared goals. For example, politeness is important for facilitating effective social cooperation.⁶ We also know that being the target of incivility can reduce productivity, creativity and even effective cognitive processing.⁷ Most people working in groups or organisations who experience incivility lose time worrying about it, cut back on their efforts and contributions, and about 12% will leave a group or organisation as a result.⁸ Organisations can also expect to see performance significantly decrease in those who merely witness incivility against others.⁹ Therefore, condoning this behaviour or failing to effectively address it within the Party is likely to not only have significant impacts on individual members, but to directly affect our ability to fundraise, organise, elect more Greens and implement Greens policy.

Our members come from many walks of life. Indeed, we need the breadth of experience among the membership to continue to increase if we are ever to become a successful party of government. We cannot assume that we all come to be a member with the same expectations of how we interact with one another, and within our intensely political environment we must expect that there will be times where our interactions may become difficult. Our Party promotes social cooperation, community-building, consensus-building, and a belief in science and reason. We proudly profess to 'doing politics differently'. In order to live up to these commitments, to persuade voters and donors that we are the real deal, and to grow and engage our membership, I contend that we must, as a collective, agree upon and

adhere to certain standards of civility. If we do not, I fear that it may prove to be our undoing.

- 1 J Cherie Strachan and Michael R Wolf, 'Calls for civility: An invitation to deliberate or a means of political control?' in Daniel M Shea and Morris P Fiorina (eds), *Can We Talk?: The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics* (Pearson, 2012) 41-52.
 - 2 Michael Schudson, 'Why conversation is not the soul of democracy' (1997) 14(4) *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 297-309.
 - 3 Lisa M Penney and Paul E Spector, 'Job stress, incivility, and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB): the moderating role of negative affectivity' (2005) 26(7) *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 777-796.
 - 4 Christine Porath, *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace* (Little, Brown & Company, 2016).
 - 5 Ryan L Claassen and Michael J Ensley, 'Motivated Reasoning and Yard-Sign-Stealing Partisans: Mine is a Likable Rogue, Yours is a Degenerate Criminal' (2016) 38 *Political Behavior* 317-335.
 - 6 Matteo Bonotti and Steven T Zech, *Recovering Civility during COVID-19* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) ch 2.
 - 7 Christine L Porath and Amir Erez, 'Does rudeness really matter? The effects of rudeness on task performance and helpfulness' (2007) 50(5) *Academy of Management Journal* 1181-1197.
 - Anat Rafaeli et al, 'When customers exhibit verbal aggression, employees pay cognitive costs' (2012) 97(5) *Journal of Applied Psychology* 931-950.
 - 8 Christine M Pearson and Christine L Porath, *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business And What You Can Do About It* (Portfolio, 2009).
 - 9 Christine L Porath and Amir Erez, 'Overlooked but not untouched: How rudeness reduces onlookers' performance on routine and creative tasks' (2009) 109(1) *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 29-44.
-

14 Likes



A guest post by

Dr Josh Fergeus

Josh has been a member of the Australian Greens Victoria since 2004. He has represented the Greens as a candidate at 10 elections, and in 2016 became the first ever Green elected to Monash City Council. Josh was re-elected in 2020.


46 Comments

Commenting has been turned off for this post



David Zyngier Mar 5  Liked by Dr Josh Fergeus

Thank you Josh for your clarity here. This is what or should makes The Greens different to other parties. It's not just about winning, but how we win! We therefore do not take donations from certain groups. As it should be. And we give support and preference for marginalised groups, not just the powerful and mainstream. As it should be. But what we also do is work by consensus. No one group, whether they are the elected Party Room, or a special "interest" group, can determine the Party policy. Of course we need to listen to "lived experience", and learn from those groups. But they do not make policy, only recommendations. Otherwise our policies could be a hodge podge of contradictions. In the end our Party is greater than the sum of its individuals or various groups competing sometimes for their own objectives. All of us need to reflect on our personal interactions, think before we accuse someone, listen carefully and be open to challenging ideas and ask questions without fear of retribution or shaming.

 LIKE (11) ...

6 replies



Richard Barnes · Writes Richard Barnes · Mar 5 · ❤️ Liked by Dr Josh Fergeus

Thanks Josh. IMO, a considered and thoughtful piece. I've been a Green for a long time, and I agree that we should surely start from the premise that we are all working together, (i) to save the planet and (ii) to achieve greater social equity for everyone.

We are far more likely to make progress on these things with all of us working together.

Do I think we will never have disagreements? Of course not. But if our interactions are civil, we can surely work through them.

One thing I would add to Josh's piece is the need for tolerance of genuine differences in opinion.

❤️ LIKE (5) ...

© 2023 Andrew Conley · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great writing