

**The age of offence**  
*Defining Offence*

**Philip Seargeant, Iain Wilson, Peter Tatchell, Ash Sarkar:**

PETER TATCHELL: I find it offensive when people say bigoted things about women, Black people, or LGBTs.

ASH SARKAR: Offensive it's generally not a word that I use to identify problems with things. So, when I think of something that's offensive, I think of a bad smell. When I look at somebody in blackface, I go that's racist.

IAIN WILSON: There might be things that personally annoy me, for instance, when people are peddling false information-- and we've seen a lot of that recently-- about the coronavirus and the American election. So that perhaps could wind me up a little bit, but I try not to take offence.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Defining offence is a slightly tricky issue because it's something which - you can be offended by the very small things. A lot of people get, for example, offended by punctuation errors. But on the other hand, you can get offended by very-- the use of very violent language, the use of brutality, and so forth. So, it's a very wide concept. But I think the basic notion of what offence is involves when someone causes harm to your sense of self, to the values you believe in.

PETER TATCHELL: When someone says something that causes offence, one always must be mindful of the intention and motive. So, people may say something quite innocently without intending to cause offence, and in that case, I don't think it should be held against them.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: An important issue around the relationship between language and offence culture is this paradox that language has. On the one hand, language is just words. Sticks and stones may break my bones. It's not an actual physical violence, coercion, or anything. But on the other hand, language is absolutely central to the way that society is organized. Language does have an incredible power.

ASH SARKAR: You can say sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Well, tell that to the kids who during the desegregation of education in the United States had to walk a gauntlet of racists in the South hurling the N-word at them, right? You tell me sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me because those words were also connected to systems of violence. So, you've got the mental health toll, you've got the connection between certain forms of language and certain systems of violence, and then the third thing is that dehumanizing language creates the room for dehumanizing policies.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: In the attention economy that we now operate in, this can be a very useful-- a very good way of drawing attention to yourself, getting a lot of press coverage, and thus getting your message out. And we've seen this a lot with populist politicians, Donald Trump obviously, Boris Johnson to an extent, saying things which are offensive and thus provocative and thus get endless coverage in the media.

ASH SARKAR: There's a gamble that's being made, and one side of it has been made quite clearly by Dominic Cummings which is that no one cares really about these confected outrages. Yes, you've got micro events. Yes, they keep us all busy. Yes, they dominate the headlines, but it doesn't necessarily affect voting behaviour as much as people thinks that it does. So, it's a way of distracting, right? Keeping your opponents busy with something which ultimately won't be effective when it comes to changing people's minds.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: The second way it can be used in politics is as a way of demeaning your opponents. It's a classic propaganda technique to demean, dehumanize, and so forth an enemy within politics. And a good way of doing this is through insults and being offensive in certain way.

ASH SARKAR: Once we acknowledge that as well as speaking as individuals, we are often speaking on behalf of or to a collective, then it means that we can be a little bit more honest about what's driving some of this dismissive language. And it helps us explain sometimes why there's so much heat and hostility and an urge to completely delegitimize your opponent and grind them into the dust. It's because what's at stake is so much more than a conversation.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: And the third way is that the concept of offense culture can itself be exploited as a divisive technique in politics. We see this particularly around notions of political correctness, around notions of social justice where to one sides, it's important to mind what sort of language you're saying because that is an indicator of a certain political viewpoint. On the other side, it's a violation of free speech and so forth.

ASH SARKAR: So, when you've got things like, oh, you're just a millennial snowflake, you've never worked hard a day in your life, your generation doesn't know they're born, it's an expression, an outgrowth of a material, a cultural, and a political divide, which in this country is pretty much unprecedented.

[MUSIC PLAYING]