

Sunday 8th July:

Agitators at work

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'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' Thus opens Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, with a beautiful sentence that has all the appearance of enshrining truth, until you stop to think about it. Irony is one way of puncturing the platitudes of common sense and spin, but more vigorous methods are often necessary.

Tell us about those methods in your life. Agitation and dissent are seldom welcomed by those who support the status quo, yet they are essential for the long-term health of any community, institution, or intellectual discipline. Voltaire didn't actually say 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it' (it is a paraphrase of his views from 1907), but the proverb is a crucial principle of liberal institutions. It is a principle under pressure in the command and control world of modern government and corporations. Tell us how and why to resist the pressures.

Nevertheless, you may also wish to consider the human cost of agitation, both to the agitators and to those who sincerely support the status quo being undermined (none of us cares about the cost to those who corruptly benefit from controlling dissent, I presume). It is easy wax sanctimonious about the ills and idiocies of the world, but harder to be clear-minded and charitable in seeking to address them.