Woman of the year?

by Simon Belt

Transgender has been in the news a lot this last year, and this week had a few stories of prominence where transgender was the key component. Glamour magazine gave Caitlyn Jenner *The Transgender Champion* award, Germaine Greer withdrew from speaking at Cardiff University when the Women's Society launched a campaign to have her dis-invited, and the case of Tara Hudson who was sent to HMP Bristol starkly posed the issue of how the authorities decide on the status of transgender individuals.

A lot is changing in discussions on identity, in terms of the languauge that is to be used and who the authorities on policing that language should be. The case of Germaine Greer having the Women's Society campaign against her speaking at Cardiff University is a useful case to highlight this and poses some very serious problems the censorious climate policing language around identity issues pose. Germaine Greer has been an ardent campaigner for women's liberation, making a dramatic impact on the second-wave feminism with the publication of *The*

Female Eunuch
in 1970. Indeed, The Female Eunuch was a book that my mum would refer to, along with Spare Rib, when explaining why my brothers and sister would be sharing the cleaning and laundry duties equally, and that it wasn't her responsibility as a mother or wife.

That women's voices should be freely aired rather than silenced is an abiding association I have with Germaine Greer. How ironic then that the Women's Society at Cardiff University have been campaigning for the invitation to Germaine Greer to speak there should be withdrawn. What rabble rousing message could Germaine possibly be intending to promote that is so dangerous to women that it needs the Women's Society to protect them from hearing? To be honest it's hard to see from what Germaine has written or said that could warrant her voice being censored from the university campus, an arena in society carved out to investigate, unpick and dissseminate ideas and knowledge. I've looked at reports of the comments cited as reason why she souldn't be allowed to speak, and listened to interviews she's given to explain her opinions and I don't see anything so overwhelming that students or academics couldn't cope with if they were to hear.

In a nutshell, the problem is that Germaine Greer thinks that a man undergoing sex-change surgery doesn't become a women because of it. It's not an unusual opinion to have, indeed Germaine Greer says she thinks it's a viewpoint that a lot of other women hold. There's a very interesting, and telling, response by Kirsty Wark when interviewing Germaine Greer over her opinion for BBC Newsnight - see http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b06jtj2p/newsnight-23102015 from 16 minutes, where she says than many women hold a similar view to her than sex-change surgery doesn't make men into women but daren't say so. Kirsty Wark, looking for the offence giving quote switches mid sentence from other women holding similar opinions to Germaine Greer (and disregards them) to a focus on the feelings of people undergoing sex-change surgery - "Just because they (many women) daren't say so, <switch of focus> doesn't mean that person (transsexual M-F) can't feel like that and feel more comfortable with themselves". That Germaine Greer doesn't succumb to Kirsty's offence seeking journalism, citing *The Transgender Champion* award to be given to Caitlyn Jenner with all the moral highground of the moment against her solicits a worthy and forthright response.

So, what does all the high profile interest in transgender issues indicate about the health of our society? Germaine Greer typically punts that a Woman of the year award being given to a man who decides to become a woman is an act of misogyny in society and that women really don't need men to show them how to be women. Interestingly the Cardiff University Women's Society say that Germaine Greer is being misogynist for saying transgender men who become women aren't real women, and that those views are dangerous to women who need to be protected from such opinions. Germaine Greer's response that we should not be walking on egg shells around the topic is certainly combative, but seems to be on the losing side of the argument where the policing of speech through etiquette or outright bans and censorship are becoming the accepted response. The tactic of no platforming speakers or writers who trangress the new codes of conduct and speech seems to be in the ascendency and without serious opposition.

Institutions that have stood the test of time for centuries do seem to be undergoing an identity crisis, a loss of purpose, or perhaps more poignantly a crisis of authority and self-belief. The Academy is certainly not immune from this trend, and the dramatic expansion of Higher Education from the Thatcher era there has been a denigration of the content of education leaving us with today's generation and their 'student experience' in a 'safe space'. The tragedy of contemporary campaigns in universities to protect students from challenging ideas may well use seemingly edgey campaigns to bring transgender politics out of niche circles into the mainstream but the authoritarian way in which they seek to impose the right way to talk about them reflect a nervousness towards the discussion being had out in the open.

I simply can't see any merit in closing down public discussions, like censoring Germaine Greer from speaking at Cardiff University, when issues like transsexuality need more openess critical discussion of. When I'm invited to look at previously taboo topics and told they can only talked about them in a way a self-selecting clique of people have determined they should be talked about, I instinctively think there is an agenda at play. The exaggerated and worthy interest in transgender issues making its way onto the front pages at the moment indicates a profound

crisis of identity far more extensive than any transsexual community being brought in from the cold.

Many individuals trying to navigate their transition from being a man to becoming a women have a difficult time of it, and Germaine Greer is right in that it's not a convincing tranformation for many people. In a similar way, I'd say that those who present themselves as protecting the vulnerable are very often less than convincing, and their positioning of themselves as our guardians is just self-serving elitism but coming from a position of weakness. The authoritarianism of campaigners for the protection of transgender men or young women vulnerable to misogynist ideas need to be challenged over their denigration of free speech however nice they may dress it up.