



What New Labour did for free speech

Index 2/07: Index on Censorship takes a critical look at the health of free speech in the UK on New Labour's tenth anniversary in power. New restrictions on what you can say and where you can say it mean we have to mind our language more than we used to.

Has the UK become a less tolerant society? How much has been sacrificed in the name of national security?

Leading commentators examine the defining influences of the decade on free speech in the UK and assess how far New Labour has delivered on its promises to introduce more open government.

WITH

Alistair Beaton, Martin Bright, A L Kennedy, Conor Gearty, AC Grayling, David Leigh, Anthony Lester, Martin Rowson, Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, Oliver Kamm, Nasar Meer, Julian Petley and Peter Wright

PLUS Martin Rowson's Stripsearch



MADE IN VAGINA TESTICLES STIR UP STORMS

United States

Vagina T-Shirt storm blows through Kansas City

US gets sensitive about private parts. By John Hendel



Maryland's LeRoy E. Myers: Seeks ban on plastic bull's testicles.

America's genitalia have had better days. A number of incidents in the past month have exposed the US's squeamishness over its private parts. John Hendel reports.

The first incident of note occurred in January 2007 in Kansas City, Missouri. On 9 January a supply of T-shirts arrived at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Women's Center that would never see the light of day. The T-shirts displayed three cartoon vaginas and the phrase 'Made in Vagina'.

The centre's director, Brenda Bethman, halted the distribution of the t-shirts, which had been planned as part of a fundraiser for a production of play *The Vagina Monologues*. Some members were quick to protest what they call censorship.

'Bethman took it upon herself to unilaterally ban the sale of the shirts after they arrived from the printers early last week,' University senior Neil Womelduff said. 'The beautifully illustrated image of a vagina on the shirts apparently offends her conservative eye, despite the fact that the design was agreed upon democratically earlier last fall.'

Yet this is not the first time Kansas City feminists encountered trouble in the expression of vaginas. Only a year earlier Feminists United, who wanted to sell chocolate moulds of vaginas, had their project shut down by the university.

This American reservation over genitalia representations carries over to other parts of the country and even to other species, such as the recent Maryland case concerning bull testicles.

In some parts of the United States, people express themselves by hanging fake bull testicles from their trucks. This is common in many parts of the country. Yet in mid-February, Delegate LeRoy E. Myers Jr. filed legislation with the General Assembly of Maryland to ban these displays.

'Children shouldn't be exposed to giant plastic gonads,' AP reported Myers Jr saying. He told local paper the *Hagerstown Herald-Mail* that it was 'time to take a stand'.

Each time the subject reared its head was followed by a wave of cries about appropriateness and frantic efforts to hide a free-spirited exhibition of free expression. Even the mention of genitalia, though, can send people into a frenzy.

The word 'scrotum' appears on the first page of Susan Patron's acclaimed, Newbery Medal-winning children's book *The Higher Power of Lucky*. This has caused an explosion of outrage and censorship. Librarians and schoolteachers around the country attacked the book in February after a hundred thousand copies arrived in bookstores, schools, and libraries around 5 February. Several states in the South, the West, and the North-east of the United States banned the book from school libraries and more may continue the trend.

'I don't want to start an issue about censorship,' said one the book's opponents, a Colorado schoolteacher named Dana Nilsson, in a *New York Times* article. 'But you won't find men's genitalia in quality literature. At least not for children.'

Manifestos for free speech: Shami Chakrabarti, Article 19, Sonja Linden, Kenan Malik and Jonathan Heawood call for change

PIUS

Hrant Dink: an exclusive extract from one of his last interviews

The scrotum, however, is not even human. The 10-year-old orphan protagonist Lucky overhears a man's conversation about a rattlesnake biting his dog on the scrotum. The protagonist ponders the sound of the word, but never learns its meaning or implications. The one word has earned the book condemnation and censorship all over the country.

It seems the United States is not ready for any bold appearances of genitalia. The year 2007 already reveals rampant censorship in this regard and has shown how some will stop at nothing to keep them off T-shirts and trailer hitches, and out of children's books.

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» **Index on Censorship**
6-8 Amwell Street
London EC1R 1UQ
United Kingdom

T: 44(0)20 7278 2313
E: the_website@editors