

Folau folly may tap deep vein

Many of those engaged in debate over rugby player Israel Folau's homophobic pronouncements are probably too young to remember McCarthyism, but that's no reflection on them.

Decades have passed since the term was used to define the slagging off of those holding minority views. Joseph McCarthy – a US senator who accused many fellow Americans of being communists and spies during the Cold War years – died in 1957 and his nasty legacy faded.

A principle that remains, however, concerns what happened to discredit McCarthy...eventually. For an unconscionably long time, nobody challenged the man over his extreme claims. The media was complicit. It faithfully recorded his attacks, which were ignored by many in a position to dispute them because they feared being his next target.

And so it went on, until broadcaster Edward Murrow condemned the emperor's lack of garb. He is remembered as an epitome of courage in the face of moral outrage. New Zealand's Brad Weber put himself in similar company when he became the first significant rugby figure here to buck conformity and call Folau's attack disgusting. Others followed.

Less well remembered about McCarthy was his concurrent campaign against homosexuals. Are there parallels to Folau's folly? Some, perhaps. But given the fact homosexuality is no longer a criminal offence in most if not all civilised nations, his attack runs against what lawmakers perceive to be popular belief, rather than playing to it as McCarthy did.

Any sense of déjà vu comes from parallels in the communications arena. McCarthy was finally discredited by journalism, as others became emboldened by Murrow's stance. But before that happened, the media considered its main role was to provide "objective" coverage of McCarthy's statements. Its editorial voice, the opinion machine, was silent.

There were defences of the man's right to freedom of speech, a standard reaction that seeks to justify the dissemination of unpopular views. Alan Jones - Australian broadcaster and former national rugby team coach - took that very line over Folau.

I haven't seen any comment from whatever religious organisation Folau associates himself with. We can only speculate on how deep this kind of thinking might run in Australia and New Zealand. Does he voice sentiments shared by a silent segment too cautious to say anything out loud?

In asking that, I put aside the views of social media extremists and push my query towards people who may never have accepted the law change, never modified their thinking. They must surely exist. Opposition to homosexual law reform was expressed by a sizeable number when debate raged in the 1980s. Such attitudes don't necessarily vanish because of majority acceptance and culture changes.

So, does Folau have unvoiced public support for the homophobic sentiment itself, rather than his right to express it? Have we truly moved beyond the days of sexual discrimination or is there some unspoken appetite to revisit what has seemed settled?

I have a particular interest, although it's not what you might think. It concerns my small role in bringing about change in the legal status of homosexuals. When the New Zealand architect of homosexual law reform, Fran Wilde, introduced her bill to Parliament in 1985, it was by no means certain to succeed. It was going to need a significant shift in public opinion, something not helped by silence from editorial writers.

A group of Auckland businessmen approached me for help. They perceived the Auckland Star to be the country's leading liberal proponent and asked if we would back the bill. I agreed; the cruel effects of a law cast in times of Victorian repression didn't accord with a modern secular world. Besides, the Star was renowned for backing underdog causes, exemplified by the work of its crusading journalist, Pat Booth.

I asked our editorial writer to cast a strongly supportive leader article. Newspapers around the country quickly followed suit. The world didn't stall, indicating a mood for reform had been boiling away under the surface. The country's biggest paper, the New Zealand Herald - a bastion of conservatism in those days - held off, thinking it spoke for a large group that would disapprove. But it got there in the end.

There was a final irony when the Star's last editor launched a tabloid-like attack on gays in the early 90s. That same group of businessmen pulled their advertising support, which was probably all that kept the paper going by then. It closed, its sadly inappropriate new voice with it.