

If Mumsnet can stand up for free speech, why can't MPs?

James Kirkup



OK, I admit I'm a bit of a Mumsnet groupie, but this needs to be said: Justine Roberts is great. Roberts is the founder of Mumsnet who has this week come out fighting for free speech and sensible political discussion, both of which are at risk in the debate about gender laws. Why Mumsnet? Because a website previously best known for chat about childcare, biscuits and something called a **penis beaker** has developed an important role in an important political debate.

As I and others have noted before, it can be hard to talk about the politics and policy of gender and sex if you aren't prepared to simply repeat, without question, a certain orthodoxy (some tenets of the faith: "transwomen are women"; self-defined gender trumps biological sex; some women have penises.) Because when you question that orthodoxy, some people call you names and maybe even threaten to do bad things to you. Especially if you're a woman. Hence lots of women who do indeed question that orthodoxy find it hard or frightening to raise their concerns openly. Instead, they talk via Mumsnet, where the "Feminist Chat" forum is heaving with women (and yes, some men) discussing reform of the Gender Recognition Act, single-sex exemptions in the Equality Act, the safeguarding policy of Guiding UK and other issues that arise when you let men take the right to be treated as women on the grounds that they say they feel like they're female. I've learned an awful lot by following such conversations.

The prominence of that forum has been growing in recent months and some people don't seem to like that. Recent weeks have seen a visible increase in new users appearing in discussion threads and saying things that appear intended to goad users into saying harsh things about transgender people. Such comments are then adduced as proof that Mumsnet is a place where hate-speech against the trans community is not just tolerated but encouraged. Some (and I stress *some*) transgender people and trans-rights campaigners talk about Mumsnet the way the *Daily Mail* sometimes talks about radical mosques, painting it as an incubator of violent extremism. As a regular reader, I do not recognise that picture.

Others have gone further, attempting to use allegations that Mumsnet is hosting and encouraging transphobia to pressure the site's advertisers into pulling their sponsorship. If you run a business dependent on advertising, this is not something to be taken lightly. But instead of being cowed, Roberts has decided to take on the mob. She's gone public about the threats, and insisting that Mumsnet will not shut down civil debate about a matter of public interest. "Transgender activists have contacted Mumsnet advertisers and said they will be organising a boycott of their products if they don't remove their advertising from Mumsnet," **she said this week**. "What's worrying to me is the thought-police action around speech and the shutting down of the right to be able to disagree and immediately labelling it as transphobic."

Now, some people may think such warnings are overblown, that the idea of women, in an age of online communication, being silenced is an exaggeration. They should have a look at this court case, where Tara Wolf, a 26-year-old transwoman was **convicted** of assaulting 61-year-old feminist Maria Maclachlan. During the case, the judge admonished Ms Maclachlan for referring to Wolf as "he". Ms Maclachlan said that she used male pronouns for Wolf because she considers Wolf to be biologically and legally male. Nonetheless, the judge instructed her to use female pronouns because Wolf "wished to be referred to as a woman". Ms Maclachlan does not believe Wolf is a woman, but was effectively instructed to say things in court that she did not believe were true.

I'll repeat that. A woman who was assaulted by a person she considers to be male was told by the judge hearing the case to refer to that person as female – out of respect for her attacker's feelings. That is the extent to which the enforced norms of the transgender debate can affect a person's ability to express themselves as they wish.

Does Roberts agree with the gender critical feminists? Does she back the transgender rights advocates? I have no idea, because she hasn't said what she thinks. She's just said it's important that people have the space to debate an important issue freely and without fear. She's right and for saying so she deserves real praise.

But her example also raises some questions. Why should it fall to Mumsnet to provide that space, and to Justine Roberts to defend that space, even at risk to the business she has built? Why should women feel they need an anonymous online forum to debate simple matters of public policy, culture and science?

Long before Mumsnet or the internet even existed, we created a place where people's views could be heard and discussed, where opinions could be aired and compared. We even employed a group of people to ensure that such opinions would be raised and considered. The place is called Parliament and the people are called MPs. As a result of writing about this issue here over the last few months, I have come to know that quite a few of those MPs, from all parties, think that the sorts of questions the Mumsnetters are asking about gender are quite reasonable and should be answered. But precious few of those MPs will say so in public. They are not willing to do what Justine Roberts has done and say openly that there is nothing transphobic about debating gender and sex, even if some people don't like some of the things that are said in that debate, because – and this cannot be said enough – *there is no right not to be offended*.

Justine Roberts has shown she has the balls to stand up for free speech and sensible political debate. The time is coming for MPs to show some courage and do the same.

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