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TIME TO CORNER MARKET ON FREE SPEECH

Over the holidays, I was fortunate enough to be able to accompany my family to London, which is one of my favorite cities in the world. There is one little ritual which I always enjoy when I am there, which is a visit to Speakers Corner in Hyde Park. This time, I took my children, aged 14 and 16 to see what is truly a living example of democracy at work.

By time-honored tradition, every Sunday, speakers gather there with an assortment of chairs and ladders. When they are standing on the chairs and ladders, they are theoretically no longer standing on British territory and are allowed to say whatever they want, about any subject. Nothing is sacred. Depending on the time of year, you will hear religious fanatics of all sorts, political extremists and ordinary people simply speaking their minds.

Crowds of people drift from one speaker to the next. Heckling is allowed of course, and this can be quite amusing. Years ago, I listened to a woman heckle a man who was talking about politics. His response? "I cannot trust women like you in politics. Today you are conservative, tonight you are liberal and tomorrow you are in labor". Not very "PC" perhaps, but all this verbal sparring takes place in an atmosphere completely free of fear. Under no circumstances is physical contact with neither the speaker nor whatever he or she is standing upon. You can and will be arrested for interfering this way.

As crowds drift, groups form, sometimes discussing what has been said, sometimes discussing similar themes, but all this in an atmosphere of total informal-

ity and freedom. The unwritten rule seems to be that you don't have to agree with what is being said, but you have to be able to have the freedom to say it.

My children were fascinated, and listened to the different speakers and the discussions going on around them in rapt silence. They had never seen adults talk about such a range of potentially explosive topics, in the open with people responding openly and sometimes, heatedly – but never with violent consequences. Their question was, inevitably, "is there somewhere in Cincinnati where this goes on?"

Sadly, my answer was no. It seems that there is nowhere in this city (and perhaps this country) where people can stand up on public property before their fellow citizens and say whatever is on their mind. You'd probably have to get a permit. You certainly would not be guaranteed to be free of harm, although we would like to believe differently. This is a tremendous shame. We are always lead to believe that freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, but this usually applies to written speech these days, in an age where guns are prevalent and intolerance is moving away from race and into the world of politics and social norms. Here is my challenge to local politicians: want to promote Cincinnati as Freedom Central? Establish a Speakers Corner in our own Hyde Park.