

Watt is but one sign of reversed consciousness

Well, good old Jim Watt has had another outbreak of foot-in-mouth disease. The good Interior Secretary has managed to outrage and insult so many people in his short tenure as secretary that it is becoming almost a joke.

Almost.

In the past years, Watt has insulted American Indians, environmentalists, liberals ("There are two kinds of people, Good Americans and 'liberals'"), rock music fans, ('too many of the bad element are drawn to rock concerts') and now he has stuck his foot in the fire again by announcing that he had appointed "a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple" to an important national commission.

When Watt insulted environmentalists, he apologized and President Reagan accepted that apology. When he insulted American Indians, he said 'no harm intended' and that was accepted.

When Watt insulted rock music fans, Reagan made light of it and presented him with a plaster of paris foot with a bullet hole in it.

Now that Watt has insulted women, blacks, Jewish and handicapped people, the president hasn't even asked for an apology. He likes the man who is characterized as the darling of conservative Republicans.

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In Canada, a member of Parliament has drawn fire after news reports that he commented in a hearing on aboriginal rights that "we wouldn't be having all these problems if all the Indians were killed off a hundred years ago."

When reports of this comment made news there was no storm of criticism from outraged fellow parliamentarians but instead, outrage that the news media had reported on a private conversational joke.

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Mae Tischer from Anchorage a while back used the phrase "nigger in a wood pile" during a hearing on a matter which has long been lost to our memory. She said it was a common phrase.

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These instances have no specific connection but together they are making us uncomfortable indeed.

During the 1970s, the television program "All in the Family" held Archie Bunker and his racial and sexual slurs and mind set up to well-deserved ridicule. People became aware of the injury done to others when a group of people was ridiculed, put down or kept from work because they were Polish, Indian, women, Jewish or handicapped.

Numerous social programs were started and U.S. Justice Department efforts were focused on insuring that no groups of people suffered injury because another group was bigoted.

Now that we have Ronald Reagan in the White House, we have a Secretary of the Interior who is not held accountable for his bigotry.

That form of unaccountability has the tendency to trickle down. If the man at the head of Interior can denigrate women, blacks, "cripples," we wonder what happens when a complaint about such behavior is registered against people working for him. No action?

And what about the rest of the country?

If the President is willing to tolerate that form of behavior in one of his advisors, does it not follow that others will be more willing to follow the lead?

With Reagan's election, an end was heralded to many of the social help programs of the 1960s and 1970s. They were said to cost too much. He now seems to be setting a lead that signals an end to the social consciousness of the 1960s.

It doesn't cost anything to treat people as human beings. We wonder how he rationalizes that.