

[Being civil to civil servants](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Sunday 27 July 2008



The Times brings us the rather startling news that you can, when in France, be punished for insulting a [civil servant](#) [3].

The offence ? which carries a maximum sentence of six months in prison and a €7,500 fine ? dates from Napoleonic times and is designed to protect "the dignity ... of a person charged with a public service mission". Behind the *legalesse* is the belief that civil servants are the embodiment of a French State that deserves the respect and support of all its citizens. The number of prosecutions for insulting police officers and other civil servants has risen from 17,700 in 1996 to 31,731 last year in what critics say is an abuse of government power.

I agree that calling a policeman *un connard* (roughly, a stupid bastard) isn't perhaps the wisest of things to do, but making it a criminal offence punished by a month in jail for calling the Interior Minister a "bloody Hungarian" does seem to be going a little far. Insulting the President's mother might not be polite, but a similar sentence seems way over the top, as does a €3,500 fine for Gerard Depardieu for calling three HSE inspectors "jokers".

Leaving aside all of the free speech implications (where would blogging, indeed political commentary, be if such rules were enforced here?) what the law really betrays is a wildly different conception of the State. There it is something which the citizenry should not just obey but also admire. Here we have a rather different idea (however much it is honoured only in the breach). There are some things which both have to be done and have to be done collectively, with the powers of compulsion that are available only to the State. We thus contract that those things will indeed be done by said State but agree that it's a necessary evil rather than something desirable in and of itself, certainly not something to be admired in anything other than its effects.

Of course, we should be polite to civil servants, but this is a matter of manners not the threat of the law. We should be polite to all our servants, all those we employ: for as long as they do remember that we employ them, of course. As and when the beneficiaries of our largesse fail that test and start to think that they rule at anything other than our pleasure we're entirely entitled to call them anything and everything under the sun.

Given what said State has done to places like Glasgow East and other such sink areas over the decades *connard*, joker and bloody (fill in epithet of choice here) seem a little too mild actually.

Source URL: <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/justice-and-civil-liberties/being-civil-to-civil-servants>

Links:

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/justice-and-civil-liberties/being-civil-to-civil-servants>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5778>

[3] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4402389.ece>

[4] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[5] <http://disqus.com>