

The Risk of Freedom Briefing

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Polemics and Political Correctness

'Political correctness' began life as a term of approval; it quickly became a term of abuse. In the mouth of those who first employed it, 'PC' denoted behaviour that was sensitive, non-discriminatory and 'inclusive'. People were to be encouraged to show that they respected the rights and freedoms of others, regardless of age, sex, race or sexual orientation.

To many people wedded to older ideas of good behaviour, however, PC seemed like a threat. Those who lay down codes of conduct, claiming to be 'inclusive', are in an inherently paradoxical position. For codes work by excluding things. A code of behaviour condemns the non-conformist, and is spread by punishing the offender. Most people found no difficulty in accepting that insults directed at others on account of their race or sex should be forbidden. But when it came to 'speech codes' and 'body language', with proposals to outlaw expressions, gestures, or habits that might be found offensive, many people were alarmed. In a world teeming with eccentric beliefs, how can we avoid saying things offensive to the deeply held convictions of *someone*? Before what tribunal would the crime of 'insensitivity' be judged, and what defence would be available to the one accused of it? These questions, fundamental to freedom, suggest that, whatever the rights and wrongs of PC, we should not try to enforce it.

People don't feel threatened by codes of conduct that endorse their existing habits. If they feel threatened by PC, this is because it seeks to reform those habits, and also to overthrow the institutions, laws and customs that uphold them. That may sound extreme, but it seems nevertheless to be true. Consider marriage. This institution, traditionally regarded as a lifetime's commitment between man and woman, with children as the normal and intended result, depends on the distinction between the sexes, the division of sexual roles, the authority of parents and the normality of family life. For many people those things are not PC, since they involve discriminating between people on grounds of sex and age, and also upholding the social structures of a traditional society. Hence PC requires us, not merely to endorse other forms of human relationship, but also to put those relationships on an equal footing with marriage — so undermining the status of marriage as a social norm. Proposals for homosexual marriage therefore emerge as a natural extension of the PC agenda.

Seeing PC in this way, however, we can understand why it exists in both mild and censorious versions. Beginning in an attitude of respect towards alternatives, it can easily develop into a hostility towards traditional customs and the laws that protect them. PC then becomes a new extension of the egalitarian world-view. And egalitarianism draws on a powerful fund of religious feeling. PC, in its most radical version, becomes an offer of *membership*, an invitation to join the new community of the sensitive. Its attitude to the heretic or the infidel becomes a form of the very thing that it began by forbidding, namely discrimination. Infidels are perceived as aggressors, violators, whose 'insensitive' conduct draws down on them the 'exclusion' that they deserve.

Under the impact of PC, therefore, you can expect traditional habits to be persecuted, and maybe even outlawed. This has not yet happened to marriage; but it has happened to school religion and segregated clubs in America, and to field sports in Britain. Of course, when things are forbidden, political incorrectness is never given as the reason. Constitutional rights, equal opportunities,

kindness to animals, even individual health, are cited. But we should read between the lines of such excuses.

Consider three practices, each of which is a serious threat to health: smoking, burger-stuffing and gay sex. Of these, smoking is definitely not PC, whereas burger-stuffing is tolerated and gay sex endorsed. There are PC crimes of 'sizeism' and 'homophobia' which protect obesity and homosexuality, but no crime of 'kapnophobia' which protects smoking. The association of smoking with the traditional division of sexual roles, with manliness and femininity of the Hollywood kind, and with the gritty attitudes of our parents, whose most cherished right was the right to a fag when you had done your duty — all these associate smoking with traditional lifestyles. Hence it is smoking, not burger-stuffing or gay sex, which is being criminalized.

There are those who think that PC is a myth, cooked up by conservative ideologues. And certainly, much of the scare-mongering has been politically motivated. However we should remember that persecution and censorship are natural to mankind, and an expression of immovable social instincts. PC may be partly a myth; but it is the kind of myth that can overnight become a reality. Maybe we should all strive to be more offensive, before it is too late.

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The Right to be Offensive: Free Speech, Autonomy and Censorship

by Mick Hume

Why make a fuss about free speech in modern Britain? After all, we do not live under a censorship-happy dictatorship. Despite the fact that our Home Secretary appears not to have a liberal bone in his body, the only books that get burnt here are the unsold autobiographies of politicians. Recent events suggest that the traditional tools of British state censorship, such as the Official Secrets Act and the 'D' notice system, are in a state of considerable disarray.

There is, however, a different kind of challenge to free speech today. It was well illustrated by an invitation I recently received to speak at the Cambridge Union. The President asked me to propose a motion in support of free speech, and I said that I certainly would. When he asked if I could suggest somebody good to oppose such a motion, I admitted that I almost certainly could not. Few reasonable people are prepared to attack the general principle of free speech these days. I suggested instead that he might refocus the debate more narrowly on the issue of offensive or *hate* speech. And lo, once the motion had been altered to *This House would protect hate speech as free speech*, we had little difficulty thinking of eminent lawyers and politicians who might speak forcefully against it.

In New Britain, free speech is not being hammered. It is being butted, as in 'I believe in free speech, but . . .' People say that they support free speech, but not for Nazis, or racists, or homophobes, or those accused of Holocaust denial, or alleged paedophiles, or some other revolting breed. The focus is on language that is deemed offensive, especially to minorities (and remember, we are all members of one minority or another now). Indeed it sometimes seems as if causing offence is itself the worst offence that one can commit.

Those new laws that seek to limit freedom of expression tend to be aimed against offensive language, as in the anti-harassment legislation or the ban on anything deemed racial abuse at football matches. The logical conclusion of this approach was spelt out last year in the Macpherson Report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which proposed that it should be made illegal to use hate speech even in the privacy of one's own home. Across society, what people can and cannot say is increasingly regulated by quasi-legal rules, codes of conduct and new conventions that target offensive language or hate speech.

On the subject of the law, it is worth noting in passing that, whilst the much-vaunted Human Rights Act enshrines everybody's right to freedom of expression, it adds that the right can be restricted 'in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the protection from disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputations or rights

of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary'. That should give plenty of scope for dealing with anything the judges deem distasteful.

The current approach involves a very different motivation for restricting free speech than existed in the past. Whereas old-fashioned political censorship was generally used to protect the privileged position of a minority at the top of society, the new spirit of censorship has ostensibly grown up in order to defend the rights and sensibilities of vulnerable minorities at the bottom.

As a consequence, standing up for free speech today can involve defending some pretty unpleasant people with some highly

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repulsive opinions. This is certainly disconcerting. But we cannot abandon our freedoms just because we do not approve of what some people do with them. Free speech does not mean that others are free to say whatever you want them to say. We either have free speech, or we do not; there is no such thing as semi-freedom.

Those who suggest that we should support free speech except for 'extremist' views might recall the argument put forward by writers from John Stuart Mill to George Orwell over the past 150 years: that it is only the unpopular or unconventional opinion that is in need of protection. The mainstream can look after itself.

There is a fundamental reason why we should defend free speech regardless of how offensive or obnoxious the speaker might be. It is not about what we think of them: I have no interest in 'racists rights' or any such nonsense. It is about how we view ourselves. Free speech is the lifeblood of a democracy of morally autonomous, responsible adults.

The fashionable attempt to outlaw offensive or hate speech reflects a low opinion of humanity today. It is based on the assumption that people are essentially weak and helpless creatures. It suggests, on the one hand, that people cannot stand insults or unpleasantness, and so must be protected

from offensive language, and on the other hand that we may be unable to resist the siren call of bigots, so that what we are allowed to hear must be policed. The notion that, if we catch a snatch of hate speech we might be incited to assault passing asylum-seekers or homosexuals, reduces us to the status of attack dogs, lacking the free will to decide how we react to what we hear.

By the same token, taking a stand in defence of free speech is an attempt to raise society's sights regarding what people are capable of. It means insisting that we can stand up for ourselves and judge for ourselves; that we want to live in a society of robust individuals who are capable of exercising their own rights and assuming their own responsibilities without any help from our enlightened betters, thanks all the same m'lud.

One key issue here is the distinction between words and deeds, and the way that line is currently being erased. The traditional distinction is alluded to in the children's verse: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' In the past individuals have been held legally responsible for their actions, but not for their ideas or opinions. During a recent court case in the USA, where a racist demagogue has been tried for inciting violence, the defence lawyers relied on the First Amendment to argue that 'it is still legal to hate and be a bigot in America'. That distinction between racist beliefs and racist violence should, I think, characterise the law in any free and civilised society. Yet it is under pressure on both sides of the Atlantic.

The crusade against hate speech seeks to erase the line between deeds and words. Now words themselves can be viewed as a violent assault not only in the minds of feminist academics who argue that pornography is rape, but in English law, where it is now possible to be convicted of 'violence against the person' for causing somebody 'fear, alarm or distress'. The process that begins by putting words on a par with actions ends up by saying that, in fact, offensive language is worse. Thus both the Labour and Tory parties recently attracted less criticism for their practical proposals to lock up and deport more refugees than they did for calling asylum-seekers 'bogus'.

That old children's saying about sticks and stones is not entirely right, of course. Words can hurt and cause offence. But, to coin another old saying, 'That's life'. It should not be an excuse for resorting to the courts or to informal censorship.

To support the 'Right To Be Offensive', the freedom to hold and express heretical opinions, is not to encourage gratuitous insults, nor to invite irresponsibility. Quite the opposite is true. People should take moral responsibility for their ideas, and be prepared to stand by their opinions. By contrast, in public

life today, where ideas seem to be shaped more by focus groups than free thinking, there is a headlong flight from principles of any kind.

At the same time, however, people should not be held legally responsible for their views, whether by the authorities or their employers. Our opinions should be openly debated and judged by our peers, not judged and sentenced behind the closed doors of courts or tribunals.

On this I tend to agree with Dr Johnson: 'Every man has a right to utter what he thinks truth, and every other man has a right to knock him down for it. Martyrdom is the test.' I am not interested in martyrdom, but we might say that responsibility is the test. We should be prepared to take responsibility, as morally autonomous individuals, for what we say, and for how we respond to what we hear, without the need for outside protection or policing.

No doubt that means we shall have to put up with some unpleasantness. But unfortunately, life cannot always be like lunch at the Lanesborough Hotel. A mature society, confident in its citizens, should surely be able to cope with some rude or offensive words without clamping its hands over ears or mouths. That is why it is always worth taking the risk of free speech.

Mick Hume is a *Times* columnist and editor of the new online publication, *Spiked*. These thoughts were presented to a discussion forum gathered at the Lanesborough Hotel in September 2000, hosted by the Institute of United States Studies.

In the Army now Lynda Lee-Potter

Political correctness has no interest in justice or fair play. It's based on fear and weakness, not on wisdom. It allowed servicewomen who signed forms agreeing that they would not become pregnant when they joined the Army to scream 'discrimination' when they flouted their terms of employment and were rightly sacked. It enabled them unjustifiably and greedily to obtain compensation which cost the British taxpayer £58 million.

Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon now says the only reason for continuing to bar women from combat roles would be if it

Gloucester Police have launched 'Operation Napkin' so that officers can listen out for racist comments among diners in Chinese and Indian restaurants. One man has been arrested.

In an attempt to distance itself from any charge to sexism, **the BBC**, on Christmas Day, broadcast, an alternative Nativity story entitled *It's a Girl*. Mind you, the content seemed a bit laddish, with Joseph's 'mates' advising Joseph to 'dump' Mary.

Scottish schools have banned the use of the word 'sissy' in support of a government clampdown on homophobia in the playground. The Anti-Bullying Network believes this word can cause 'very serious' harm.

The Scottish Church will exclude *God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman* and *Jerusalem*, along with 200 other hymns, on the grounds that the military and exclusively male imagery is inappropriate.

Stockport College in Manchester has banned the use of more than 40 'offensive' words under new equal opportunities rules. 'Taking the Mickey' is deemed anti-Irish and a warning is given on the class implications of 'ladies and gentlemen'.

Chef's choice: 'Richard' when you dine in the China Fleet country club in Cornwall. Restaurant staff claim that 'Spotted Dick' has been disallowed by EU regulations

The Home Office is considering scrapping Anno Domini (AD) in favour of Common Era (CE), AD being inappropriate for a multi-faith society. Whitehall documents will lead the way.

DC Comics, the US company that gave us Superman and Batman, has launched Apollo and Midnighter: two superheroes who not only save the world, but also cuddle up in bed with each other and watch episodes of *Friends*.

US Army's Boot Camps, are getting away from their tough image to become 'gender integrated'. The **assault course** has been replaced by a **confidence course** and abusive language has been outlawed.

could be proved they undermined operational effectiveness.

The irony is that the final decision about female soldiers will be taken by politicians who have never so much as done National Service, let alone fought in a bloody war, tried to shield a dying mate amid flying bullets, or crouched in a bunker with the blast of machine guns overhead. Unfortunately, they make decisions without conferring with the soldiers who know that their lives depend on loyalty, mutual support, instant obedience and male bonding.

They, like the rest of us, know that a pair of fornicating heterosexual corporals are unlikely to make an effective unit on a battlefield. (From the *Daily Mail* 14/2/01)

Confused Gender

Gender is a term appropriated from the study of grammar by feminists, in order to describe that aspect of sexual behaviour and sexual identity which is 'socially constructed'. By replacing the word 'sex' with the word gender, wherever sex is being discussed, the feminists hope to create the impression that the sexual aspect of the human being is infinitely plastic, and can be remodelled to any specification. Hence we can free ourselves of existing 'gender roles', which allegedly make women subservient to men. So successful has this piece of brain-washing been, that application forms for a passport now ask applicants for their gender — meaning their sex. If the feminists were right, you could honestly reply 'don't know' or 'working on it'.

(From The Dictionary of Dangerous Words)

Harry Potter books open ideological wounds in France

A lecturer at Dijon University, Pierre Bruno, has condemned Harry Potter as 'a class enemy' and a 'dangerous role model'.

'I would urge parents who want their children to develop non-sexist, non-elitist, progressive views to keep all four Harry Potter novels out of their way. Harry Potter may look like an intellectual with his glasses and his unruly hair, but once deconstructed he is only too clearly the hero of a political allegory for the triumph of the socially ascendant petite bourgeoisie.'

M. Bruno, goes on to say of the author, J K Rowling, 'It is a shame that despite having

studied in Paris, Miss Rowling failed to take critical theories of literature disseminated by higher education into account. She should instead have applied the ideas of such great French thinkers as the structuralist Roland Barthes and the unreconstructed Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to her work.'

The four Harry Potter books have sold over a million copies in France. M Bruno's opinion appeared in the newspaper *Libération*. Teachers and parents who are glad to see children engrossed in reading again, have written to *Libération* in protest at these comments.

The European Commission's Gender Equality Programme recommends positive discrimination to ensure that a higher number of women achieve key posts. 'If a man and woman of the same ability apply for a job in a category that is under-represented for women, the job should go to the woman,' said Barbara Helfferich, the official in charge of drafting the proposals. Initiatives considered by Europe are supposed to be considered with the consequences for gender equality in mind.

The Myth of Political Correctness by John K. Wilson

The myth of political correctness has created the illusion of a conspiracy of leftists who have taken over higher education and twisted it to serve their political purposes. Attacks on political correctness have misled the public and unfairly maligned a large number of faculty students. Worse yet, the crusade against PC has silenced the deeper questions about quality and equality that our colleges and universities must face, and greatly needed debate has been shut down by the false reports and misleading attacks on higher education. The myth of political correctness has made every radical idea, no matter how trivial or harmless, seem like the coming of an apocalypse for higher education, complete with four new horsepeople — Speech Codes, Multiculturalism, Sexual Correctness and Affirmative Action.

The conservative backlash against universities has been funded by right-wing foundations and supported by liberals and journalists who dislike the academic Left.

Using a long list of inaccurate anecdotes, endlessly recycled in conservative and mainstream publications, the right-wingers have distorted and manipulated debates about higher education. Presenting conservative white males as the true victims of oppression on campus they have convinced the public that radicals are now the ones who threaten civil liberties. This is the myth of political correctness that conservatives have created and successfully marketed to the media and the general public. PC 'conspirators' are called by many names — the thought police, the PC totalitarians, the new McCarthyists, and tenured radicals — but the threat is always the same: conservatives silenced, Western culture trashed, academic standards discarded, and classes turned over to politicised teaching and ethnic cheerleading.

John K. Wilson teaches in the Committee of Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He is author of *The Myth of Political Correctness: A Conservative Attack on Higher Education*.

The Concerns and Codes of PC by Dennis O'Keeffe

PC's core concerns can be specified easily: the dynamics of sexual, racial and cultural power. PC and its ideological allies insist that our societies are riddled with prejudices against women, non-whites, minority cultures and homosexuals, and marked by ill-treatment of people in these categories. Our society is held to be an unequal (hierarchical) power structure which reproduces these biases, through oppression, exploitation and other ill-treatment. The wrongs PC opposes are held to be the defining ones of our way of life.

No textbooks, no single authority nor even group of authorities represent PC. The attacks made on it are equally diffuse. Robert Hughes's brilliant critique perversely manages not to notice how intertwined PC is with the welfare state in the USA. The late Christopher Lasch even produced a magnificent chapter in one of his last books on precisely the sort of convoluted language and mental atmosphere as well as special-interest-group pleading which support PC, without actually mentioning the latter by name. All this fuzziness is the less surprising if we note — as we must — that some people believe that PC does not even exist. The best known work alleging that there is actually no such thing as PC is by John K. Wilson [above]. There are more nuanced versions. Professor Hall sympathises with PC ideas but says they make him nervous.

PC's 'codes' of practice — mostly informal in both America and Britain — contain numerous protocols governing what people can or cannot say or write or generally do. They cover such issues as our clothes, the looks we allow on our faces, or even the body language — as human gesture and posture are now called — we present to others.

PC's concerns overlap with the overheated insistence on rights which is current today, as well as with the habit of dividing the world into oppressors/exploiters and their victims. In addition PC has links with the green movement, with New Ageism/Post-Modernism and with the neo-pagan cults which either contend with established religion or seek to subvert it from within.

PC's advocates seem to be pro-abortion and the legitimisation of homosexuality, whilst maintaining hostility to the smoking of tobacco. This last grouping has no binding logic. It is, merely a contingent package on the outer fringe of PC.

The overall PC package is neither unitary nor coherent. PC proper often goes with ideas which exist quite independently, supported by people remote from most PC concerns. The present hostility to smoking is an example, as are reasonable versions of concern for the environment and animal welfare. As to coherence, though there is a core PC, contradictions abound even in this core. There is no deep logic in the fact that AIDS is PC and lung cancer not, for example. It is a result of the contingent fact that PC militates in favour of the homosexual minority and against tobacco. There is no intrinsic reason PC should be hostile to smoking, since the smoking of tobacco comes from aboriginal peoples in America who were there before the whites arrived, and whose subsequent gross ill-treatment by the whites is not only a historical truth but also a favourite multicultural theme.

Dennis O'Keeffe is Professor in the Dept. of Sociology of Education at the University of North London and author of many books on education.

This article is taken from O'Keeffe's pamphlet *Political Correctness and Public Finance*.

Publications

Political Correctness and Public Finance by Dennis O'Keeffe, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1999. O'Keeffe sees PC as a product of public finance and the rise in child-centred schooling.

The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education by John K. Wilson, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995. Wilson argues that PC is a fabrication, propagated by conservative academics.

Civil Wrongs: What went wrong with affirmative action by Steven Yates, Institute for Contemporary Studies, San Francisco, 1994. Argues that positive discrimination is fundamentally opposed to the idea of justice by which Americans live.

Incorrect Thoughts: Notes On Our Wayward Culture by John Leo. Transaction Publishers, 2001. A book of political essays and social commentary drawn from the author's 'On Society' column in the *US News and World Report*. PC is seen as a leftist theory with illiberal codes of practice.

The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate, Sarah Durant (ed). Virago, 1994. See Stuart Hall's essay 'Some Politically Incorrect Pathways Through PC' for insight into the problems that the phrase PC causes even to its sympathisers.

The Dictionary of Dangerous Words compiled for Digby Anderson. Social Affairs Unit, 2000. Never Say . . . (this volume brings you up to date). See the entry on the correct use of 'gender' [centre pages of this sheet].

www.

Search for 'political correctness' and you will find journalistic pieces where it is referred to. More useful however, are some general sites concerned with free discussion:

www.artsandlettersdaily.com an excellent way to keep up with magazines, books and newspapers.

www.spiked-online.com an online magazine edited by Mick Hume which draws from 'The Institute of Ideas'.

www.openDemocracy.net is a new online publication edited by Anthony Barnett due to be launched soon.