

What is Political Correctness?

He does not seem to know what an argument is. He never uses arguments himself. He never troubles himself to answer the arguments of an opponent... It has never occurred to him... that when an objection is raised, it ought to be met with something more convincing than 'scoundrel' or 'blockhead'.

Lord Macaulay, 'Essay on Southey's Colloquies'

The phrase 'political correctness' conjures up images of left-wing councils banning black bin-bags, nativity scenes being banned by the Red Cross and handicapped people being called 'otherwise-abled'. Some of these cases, such as renaming firemen as firefighters, merely reflect a changing reality. Others are just the most overt symptoms of political correctness, and easily ridiculed: he's not dead, he's metabolically challenged.

But political correctness is more than a joke or updating of historic language usage. It is a system of beliefs and pattern of thoughts that permeates many aspects of modern life, holding a vice-like grip over public debate, deciding what can be debated and what the terms of debate are, and which government policies are acceptable and which aren't. It has grown in influence over the last few decades to the extent that it has now become one of the most dominant features of public discourse, not just in Britain, but across the Western—and particularly the Anglophone—world.

The irony of political correctness is that it is itself almost politically incorrect. Few people like to think of themselves as politically correct, and fewer still would dare publicly admit to it. It is a term generally only used by its detractors.

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PC is also surprisingly unexamined as a phenomenon, the subject of few academic treatises and few books, at least outside the US. Criticism of it has rarely graduated from ridicule to analysis.

Part of the problem is that there is no standard definition of political correctness. Peter Coleman, a former Australian government minister from the Liberal Party, wrote:

Political Correctness is a heresy of liberalism. It emerges where liberalism and leftism intersect. What began as a liberal assault on injustice has come to denote, not for the first time, a new form of injustice.¹

He said that it was liberalism that has been taken over by dogmatism, that it is 'intolerant', 'self-righteous' and 'quasi-religious'.

The Politically Correct are more intolerant of dissent than traditional liberals or even conservatives. Liberals of earlier generations accepted unorthodoxy as normal. Indeed the right to differ was a datum of classical liberalism. The Politically Correct do not give that right a high priority. It distresses their programmed minds. Those who do not conform should be ignored, silenced or vilified. There is a kind of soft totalitarianism about Political Correctness.²

The US conservative commentator Paul Weyrich, the President of the Free Congress Foundation, is also exercised by the intolerance of political correctness, although his main concern is its antipathy to Western values:

The United States is very close to becoming a state totally dominated by an alien ideology, an ideology bitterly hostile to Western culture. Even now, for the first time in their lives, people have to be afraid of what they say. This has never been true in the history of our country. Yet today, if you say the 'wrong thing', you suddenly have legal problems, political problems, you might even lose your job or be expelled from college. Certain topics are forbidden. You can't approach the truth about a lot of different subjects. If you do, you are immediately branded as 'racist', 'sexist', 'homophobic', 'insensitive', or 'judgmental.'³

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The US commentator William Lind, director of the Centre for Cultural Conservatism, is among those who have described PC as ‘cultural Marxism’, declaring that it is ‘Marxism translated from economic into cultural terms’.⁴ He wrote:

The cultural Marxism of Political Correctness, like economic Marxism, has a single factor explanation of history. Economic Marxism says that all of history is determined by ownership of means of production. Cultural Marxism, or Political Correctness, says that all history is determined by power, by which groups defined in terms of race, sex, etc., have power over which other groups. Nothing else matters.⁵

The *New York Times*’ culture correspondent, Richard Bernstein, who came out against multiculturalism in his book *The Dictatorship of Virtue*, was also concerned about how PC tried to overturn the dominant culture and power structures. In a landmark 1990 article which sparked debate about PC in the US, he wrote:

Central to pc-ness, which has its roots in 1960s radicalism, is the view that Western society has for centuries been dominated by what is often called ‘the white male power structure’ or ‘Patriarchal hegemony.’ A related belief is that everybody but white heterosexual males has suffered some form of repression and been denied a cultural voice.⁶

These are all largely descriptions of characteristics of political correctness (discussed at length in chapter 2) and its method of working, rather than a definition of it. Dictionaries tend to give it descriptive, and sometimes circular, definitions. In his political dictionary, William Safire defines political correctness as:

Conforming to liberal or far-left thought on sexual, racial, cultural or environmental issues.⁷

Others see political correctness as little more than a form of civic gentility. The *Wall Street Journal* gave the definition:

Political correctness, for all its awfulness, is an effort to save souls through language.⁸

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For those who believe in liberal democracy and the market-place of ideas, there should be nothing wrong in attacking western culture and traditional hierarchies, insulting men, promoting homosexuality, or trying to redistribute power. Those that don't agree can openly argue back.

The problem with political correctness comes when liberal democracy and its foundation, freedom of speech, come under attack; when the market-place of ideas, rather than offering a wide range of views, offers any view so long as it's PC.

This is the most troubling aspect of political correctness, and what separates it from most other systems of belief. The most useful definition of political correctness is one which defines it by its intolerance of dissent, dictating that which is 'correct' and that which is 'incorrect': I suggest the following:

DEFINITION

Political correctness is an ideology that classifies certain groups of people as victims in need of protection from criticism, and which makes believers feel that no dissent should be tolerated.

There are many beliefs—usually based on reason, evidence and free debate—that tolerate dissent, ignore it, and sometimes even actively encourage it. Liberal democracy is utterly dominant in the West, and yet co-exists easily with those who do not believe in it, such as communists, anarchists and religious fundamentalists—until such time, as with radical Islamists, as they threaten its very survival. Science, and in particular empiricism, is dominant, but rarely bothers trying to silence those who hold unscientific beliefs such as the paranormal, alternative medicine and astrology. It just laughs at them.

Christianity is also the dominant religion in the West, which in the last century has done little to try to stifle

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dissent, but rather tolerates and even welcomes growing non-Christian minorities.

The rise of political correctness represents an assault on both reason and liberal democracy. It is an assault on reason, because the measuring stick of the acceptability of a belief is no longer its objective, empirically established truth, but how well it fits in with the received wisdom of political correctness. It is an assault on liberal democracy, because the pervasiveness of political correctness is closing down freedom of speech and open debate (see chapter 6).

For the modern mind, confronted with a new set of policy options on a difficult issue, the first reaction is not to try and divine the right answer, but the 'politically-correct' one. Many people will think first of what the true answer is, and in an effort to avoid controversy or offence, measure it up against the dictates of political correctness. Those whose intellectual faculties have been all but closed down by political correctness have learnt to automatically short-cut to the PC response.

Potentially politically incorrect arguments, whether valid or specious, are made more palatable by transposing them into politically correct arguments with the same conclusions to make them more acceptable. The Royal College of Nurses officially opposes the mass recruiting of nurses from the developing world to work in the NHS because of the impact it has on Third World health services, rather than the impact it has on its own members in keeping downwards pressure on pay and conditions, and numbers trained to be nurses.

In both public and private, people prefer to make politically correct arguments even if they know them to be wrong, than to make politically incorrect arguments that they believe to be right. Making a wrong argument which is safe is widely preferred to making a right argument which is unsafe.

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The precaution is, in the calculus of personal damage limitation, entirely rational: people who transgress politically correct beliefs are seen not just as wrong, to be debated with, but evil, to be condemned, silenced and spurned. Moral cowardice has led to intellectual dishonesty permeating and corrupting our public debates.

Across much of Britain's public discourse, a reliance on reason has been replaced with a reliance on the emotional appeal of an argument. Parallel to the once-trusted world of empiricism and deductive reasoning, an often overwhelmingly powerful emotional landscape has been created, rewarding people with feelings of virtue for some beliefs, or punishing with feelings of guilt for others. It is a belief system that echoes religion in providing ready, emotionally satisfying answers for a world too complex to understand fully, and providing a gratifying sense of righteousness absent in our otherwise secular society.

The result is that public figures sanctified as being politically correct (the high priests of PC, such as Michael Moore) are listened to with reverence on any potentially controversial issue, safe in the knowledge that even if what they say suffers the insignificant drawback of being wrong, it will at least enjoy the far for important benefit of being PC.

The politically incorrect arguments aren't engaged with; they are just stated in a way that everyone will understand means it is unacceptable because it is not PC. 'He believes women win fewer Nobel prizes because of genetic differences between men and women' is deemed a conclusive rebuff to the evidence that there are differences to men's and women's brains. When Larry Summers, the president of Harvard University, mildly suggested innate differences in ability between men and women may account for the differences in achievements at the summits of academia, he was met with walk-outs, denunciations

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and demands for resignation by people who offered no actual proof that he was wrong.

Because the politically correct believe they are not just on the side of right, but of virtue, it follows that those they are opposed to are not just wrong, but malign. In the PC mind, the pursuit of virtue entitles them to curtail the malign views of those they disagree with. Rather than say I would like to hear your side, the politically correct insist: 'you can't say that'.

Believing that their opponents are not just wrong but bad, the politically correct feel free to resort to personal attacks on them. If there is no explicit bad motive, then the PC can accuse their opponents of a sinister ulterior motive—the unanswerable accusations of 'isms'. It is this self-righteous sense of virtue that makes the PC believe they are justified in suppressing freedom of speech. Political correctness is the dictatorship of virtue.

The end result is that the politically correct build impregnable castles around their beliefs, which means, like royalty, never having to justify and never having to apologise. As the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, a champion of free thinking, wrote:

Castles in the air—they are so easy to take refuge in. So easy to build, too.⁹

In the topsy-turvy politically correct world, truth comes in two forms: the politically correct, and the factually correct. The politically correct truth is publicly proclaimed correct by politicians, celebrities and the BBC even if it is wrong, while the factually correct truth is publicly condemned as wrong even when it is right. Factually correct truths suffer the disadvantage that they don't have to be shown to be wrong, merely stated that they are politically incorrect.

To the politically correct, truth is no defence; to the politically incorrect, truth is the ultimate defence. To the politically correct, the 'truth' is no longer 'something that

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exists in objective reality’ but ‘something that supports my pre-held beliefs’. This selective definition of truth makes PC arguments almost impossible to refute.

Issue	Politically Correct Truth	Factually Correct Truth
Women’s pay less than men’s	Sex discrimination	Different work/life choices, Childcare breaks
Explosion in HIV	Teenagers having unsafe sex	African immigration
Rise in anti-Semitic attacks	White skinheads	Muslim youths
Africa getting poorer	West not giving enough aid	Bad governance

In consequence, the politically correct often believe you can justify their version of truth with a lie. When the *Mirror* published photos purporting to show UK soldiers torturing Iraqis, the paper’s supporters still justified them after they were proved to be fake on the grounds that they illustrated a greater truth (which they apparently did, but no one would be excused for illustrating a politically incorrect truth with a lie). Michael Moore fabricates facts with merry abandon in his films, and yet his supporters are unapologetic on the grounds they represent the (politically correct) truth.

In contrast, when Robert Kilroy-Silk wrote that Arabs were ‘suicide bombers, limb amputators, women repressors’, he wasn’t sacked by the BBC because it wasn’t true as a description of the most disturbing features of some contemporary Arab societies, but because it broke the laws of PC. The BBC declared that it ‘did not share’ Kilroy’s views, an implicit acknowledgement that even though as an institution it is not meant to have its own views, it by default adopts politically correct institutional beliefs. Despite the fact that government figures show that Afro-

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Caribbeans commit disproportionate numbers of violent street crimes compared to other ethnic groups, people are denounced if they say so in public.

Counter arguments to politically correct beliefs are dismissed without consideration, or simply suppressed. When the *Observer* and the BBC denounced the tyranny of the government for locking up foreign suspected terrorists without trial in Belmarsh Prison, they rarely mentioned that the suspects had defied government orders to leave the country, that despite being in prison they were free to leave Britain to any country that would take them, that many had already done so, and that the government didn't deport them forcibly to their home country because to do so would be a breach of their human rights under the Human Rights Act. To admit any of this would undermine the politically correct's attempt at creating a sense of outrage by portraying it as a simple case of a powerful Western government abusing powerless non-Western citizens. Belmarsh was not Britain's Guantanamo: the inmates of Guantanamo cannot leave and are outside the democratic rule of law, a rather important distinction.

The Redistribution of Power

But what is the point of political correctness? Why are some things politically correct, and others not?

At its most fundamental, political correctness seeks to redistribute power from the powerful to the powerless. At its most crude, it opposes power for the sake of opposing power, making no moral distinction between whether the power is malign or benign, or whether the powerful exercise their power in a way that can be rationally and reasonably justified.

The only reason that it is more politically correct for religious fundamentalists to deliberately kill as many innocent civilians as possible (Hamas suicide bombers) than for a liberal democracy (Israel) to selectively kill the

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terrorist leader responsible for the wave of suicide bombers (Hamas founder Ahmed Yassin) while trying to avoid the loss of innocent life, is because the Israeli government is strong, and the Palestinians weak.

America, as the world's most powerful country, can never do any good, even though it is the world's most powerful liberal democracy, the largest donor of overseas aid, and it defeated both Nazism and Communism.

The West, as the world's most powerful cultural and economic group, can safely be blamed for all the world's ills, even though it is largely responsible for the worldwide spread of prosperity, democracy and scientific advance.

Multinational corporations are condemned as the oppressors of the world's poor, rather than seen as engines of global economic growth with vast job-creating investments in the world's poorest countries, pushing up wages and transferring knowledge.

Conversely, political correctness automatically supports the weak and vulnerable, classifying them as nearly untouchable victims, irrespective of whether they merit such support or not. When the successful, affluent, powerful Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh was ritually murdered in the streets of Amsterdam for insulting Islam, the politically correct, including the *Guardian* and Index on Censorship, automatically sided with the comparatively powerless Islamic Dutch-Moroccan killer.

The way that PC distorts news values was shown in the comparative coverage of the murder of 52 innocent people by Islamic extremists in Britain's worst ever terrorist attack, and the killing of an innocent Brazilian immigrant by British police a fortnight later. After a few days, the coverage of the terrorist attack was obliterated by saturation coverage of the accidental police killing, much to the anger of relatives of the London bombings. The reason was simply that the terrorist attacks, although a far more important story, didn't fit the politically correct agenda,

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whereas the killing of a vulnerable immigrant by a powerful police force did.

The extent to which PC subordinates moral considerations to considerations of power is shown by the PC response to the extraordinary spectacle of Iraqis celebrating the first free democratic elections in their lives under the auspices of the US, and being threatened with being blown to bits for the simple act of voting by a coalition of Islamic fundamentalists and fascist Baath party supporters. Even the most cursory ethical consideration would show it is right to support ordinary Iraqis trying to choose their own government, over those who want to kill them for practicing that democracy. But the fact that the elections are supported by the powerful US and opposed by the comparatively powerless fundamentalists causes problems for the PC. Opposing power for the sake of opposing power, many of the politically correct left—including the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, most of the BBC and the former Labour MP George Galloway—have chosen to champion those who are deliberately trying to murder innocent civilians.

Automatically opposing the powerful and supporting the powerless means that, when presented with a new issue, the politically correct must decide not what is right or wrong, malign or benign, true or untrue, but who is the more powerful and who the less powerful. The PC analytical process enjoys the beauty of simplicity:

1. identify the victim.
2. support them and their interests, irrespective of any other factors.

Thus in a dispute between China and the US, the politically correct will tend to support China; but in a dispute between China, and, say, Tibet, they will automatically (and rightly in this case) support Tibet.

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Sometimes perceptions of relative power between groups change, and then the PC change their allegiances. Britain's politically correct used to support the white working class, seen as the victims of oppression by the middle classes; but then they discovered that the white working classes were higher up the power hierarchy than more vulnerable ethnic minorities, and so started openly targeting their ire at the white working classes (as chronicled in Michael Collins's book *The Likes of Us*). Even though the white working classes themselves hardly changed, the change in perceptions of power in society meant that attacking the white working classes suddenly went from being politically incorrect to politically correct.

The same transposition of power has happened between Jews and Muslims. Since the Holocaust, Jews have often been portrayed as the ultimate victims, and anti-Semitism as the ultimate bigotry. But in the early 2000s, partly as a result of the intifada—where the Jews are seen as oppressors rather than the oppressed—and partly as a result of rising concerns about Islam after September 11th, Muslims became the ultimate victim group, and Islamophobia the greatest bigotry.

This dual role of Jews as both oppressors and oppressed causes complications for PC calculus, but the transposition of power relations means that PC has now firmly transferred its allegiance from Jews to Muslims.

This transfer of allegiances was confirmed by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, which commissioned a report on anti-Semitism in Europe, and then suppressed it when the authors concluded that the main cause of rising anti-Semitism in Europe is Muslim youths, not skinheads and neo-fascists. The EMCR told the authors, who were Jewish, that the report would undermine their work helping Muslims, who are the most discriminated-against religious group in Europe, and told them to rewrite it to portray the main perpetrators as white racists. When the authors protested that was contrary to

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the evidence, the EMCR rewrote the report itself, and published it with a summary and conclusion that was at total odds with the evidence actually contained within it. At the press conference, the EMCR repeatedly stated that white skinheads were to blame, despite the evidence inside the report and the views of the researchers. The *Independent* newspaper followed the politically correct line with an article headlined: *White men blamed as attacks on Jews rise*.¹⁰

In stark contrast, the *Telegraph* ran a less politically correct but more factually correct article, with the headline: *EU 'covered up' attacks on Jews by young Muslims*.¹¹

Since victims are supported not because they are right but because they are vulnerable, critically questioning them is seen as attacking them, and those who do so are vilified as oppressors. In the world of PC, victims can say anything or ask for anything, not because they are right or deserve it, but because they are safe from public scrutiny or objection.

The most overt racism, sexism and homophobia in Britain is now among the weakest groups, in ethnic minority communities, because their views are rarely challenged, as challenging them equates to oppressing them. PC's inherent contradictions make it largely incapable of resolving such objectively simple ethical problems such as the murderous homophobia of Jamaican rap singers or the cruelties of forced marriages. The Labour government tolerates the numerically far greater animal cruelty of halal slaughter and bans the far less significant cruelty of fox hunting simply because the perpetrators of halal slaughter have victim status while fox hunters have oppressor status.

Few things are more powerful in a public debate than publicly acknowledged victim status, and the rewards for public victimhood are so great that there is a large incentive for people to try to portray themselves as

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victims. Thus the victim class grows bigger as more try to crowd into it, and others copy their tactics. At the beginning of twenty-first century in Britain, the obese, Christians, smokers and fox-hunters are campaigning to achieve publicly acknowledged victimhood, with the hunters trying unsuccessfully to turn PC on its head by declaring they are the real victims of 'prejudice'. Advances in medical diagnosis have meant that boys who would previously have been considered naughty and in need of discipline are now considered victims of Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder in need of support and treatment.

In the battle between emotion and reason, emotion wins most of the time for most people: the heart trumps the head because it is more difficult to live with bad feelings than bad logic. Few are the souls tortured by bad reasoning; many are those tortured by guilt. However overwhelming the evidence, people believe what they want to believe, and find it very difficult to believe what they don't want to.

The easiest way to overcome the dissonance between what you want to believe and the evidence is not to change what you believe, but to shut out the evidence and silence those who try to highlight it. Until the recent election of a right-wing government in Denmark, it was illegal to publish crime figures broken down by ethnicity of offender.

People tend to believe that which makes them feel virtuous, not that which makes them feel bad. Most people have a profound need to believe they are on the side of virtue, and can do that by espousing beliefs publicly acknowledged as virtuous. Nothing makes multi-millionaire Hollywood actors who live in Beverley Hills feel better about themselves than campaigning against world poverty by demanding more aid from the West (rather than holding African leaders responsible for the plight of their people by demanding better governance).

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But what is virtuous about this? One of the ironies of political correctness is that, since it subjugates objective truth to subjective virtue, it often causes more harm than good (see chapter 6). Good intentions pave the road to hell. The world is not short of good intentions, but it is too often short of good reasoning.