Political Correctness is deployed almost universally as it is practiced. Who is free from that inner censorship in private, let alone on public forum? And so it is of enormous value that someone should take the trouble to penetrate what exactly PC is and how it operates.

Anthony Browne has done just that. In his career as a journalist he has had first hand and often 'inside' exposure to the treatment of hot potato issues in public debate and the media. He cites the issues of the rise in heterosexual HIV due to African immigration from his spell as Health correspondent for the Observer and as Europe correspondent the rise in Anti-Semitism across Europe due to Moslem racism.

Political Correctness started in the 1950's in academia with the intent to displace pervasive habits of bigotry in relation to race and gender. Anthony Browne makes a point of acknowledging the value of the changes that occurred. His thesis is that 'most of the benefits have now been banked' and PC subsequently has gone too far.

Changing language
Society changes and it is natural that language changes accordingly. Hence with women participating throughout the workforce, chairman becomes chairperson, fireman firefighter etc. This is a sub-category of PC with which he makes no argument.

Then there are terms felt to be offensive. No one would lament the loss of words like nigger or cripple. And yet here are the words that are now the centre of political debate. He speaks of policies which simply cannot be discussed: school vouchers, alternatives to the NHS, social cohesion. Even though, he says, they are successful in Europe and Scandinavia – countries generally considered more left than UK.

Anthony Browne speaks with ease, but the discussion that followed was difficult. The room had an edgy atmosphere – political but also personal. Some were thinking: so its 'OK' to espouse the unmentionable, but is it? Dare I?

Others, particularly those who had spent a life fighting for liberal values and remember with distaste the bigotry of before, felt provoked. One said: “What we have heard tonight has been one long diatribe of victimhood, a middle class male variety, being used as a smokescreen under which to advance extreme right-wing policies.”

Some contemplated their own feelings of constraint in daily speech. Someone said “I am wondering how to take this forward – I think the motive inside is important. It that is pure I can speak out and never mind the consequences – for instance equality, to see everyone as equal, inside.”

On this front Anthony Browne’s book is very well worth a read ‘The Retreat of Reason’ (available at www.civitas.org.uk) concludes with ten precepts for the personal practice of free speech.

AB is PC
As far as he reveals his own views, Anthony Browne, is himself remarkably politically correct. He is very much the literary North London liberal. Indeed he is so liberal that his fight is for the right of others to be considerably less liberal than he. He even believes that society would be better for it. A peculiarly liberal concord.

The irony then is that where reason retreats and inferred motives are held as prime, only an Ariel Sharon could withdraw from the West Bank, only a Labour party can cut taxes and only a scrupulously PC journalist can speak out for truth and traditional values.