

Anthony Browne: *The Retreat of Reason*

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Political Correctness is deplored almost as 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 roots of the PC problem.

The offense is mitigated by moving from factual description to euphemism. But as usage moves from 'crippled' to 'handicapped' to 'disabled' to 'mobility impaired' the meaning also moves, progressively lowering the threshold of inclusion. New disabilities are also identified: attention deficit and obesity.

This is all in part engineered by activists to increase their constituency and thus their weight in political debate. The Disability Rights Commission now claims that more than 1 in 6 people in Wales are disabled.

Dominic Lawson writes in the Independent (Jan 27): "I could never get my head around quantum mechanics: I have learning difficulties. My daughter has Downs syndrome: she is mentally handicapped". He believes it harms the

original need group as resources are effectively diluted or diverted away from those with the severest problems.

Victims and oppressors

The hallmark of PC is the classification of specific groups as vulnerable. It then finds relations of oppression and exploitation which have caused their plight. PC automatically implicates those in authority or positions of strength regardless of the merits of the case.

Calling people disadvantaged (past passive) is itself a 'sentence' – one that encourages them to believe they are disempowered. It is often condemned by those from the group who reach the top – he cited Condoleezza Rice.

Here, black boys are doing badly in school. To suggest this is due to racism among white teachers is to distract the black communities from facing destructive cultures, behaviours and attitudes which are responsible for boys being too cool for school. The girls have been doing fine.

Black men and Men

PC is selective. PC worry that black men (black = victim) are over-represented on the police DNA database. Inference: institutionalised police racism. But no one worries that 'men' are over-represented. Men as a group are fair game because in PC sentiment they are an oppressor class not a victim class. In fact men are much more likely to commit crime than women. That's true. It is also true that blacks are much more likely than whites but to say that in the presence of the PC is to invite a tirade and personal condemnation.

Ad hominem + guilt by association

The Politically Correct frequently resort to *ad hominem* attack, an attack upon the person of their protagonist, rather than on the argument he has advanced. The approach often employs a form of on-the-spot psychoanalysis inferring motives such as racial hatred behind his proposition. Then, because he is a racist, his argument does not merit refutation. The mode also extends to 'guilt by association' in which some similarity of the proposition to one advocated by a known racist 'proves' his racism. The original racist of course has often been convicted in the same court. Shami Chakrabati and Polly Toynbee gained special mention here.

The effect of PC is to diminish the frankness of public debate and remove altogether some topics of discussion.



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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. If 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 the better for it. A peculiarly liberal conceit.

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.