

Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

The PC Agenda

Political correctness is rarely out of the news these days. Whether it's stories about Josie Bullock being sacked by the Department of Corrections for refusing to give up her front row seat during a graduation ceremony, the on-going debate over whether fireworks should be banned, or the announcement by the National Party that they have finally recognised political correctness as an issue of public concern by appointing a 'PC eradicator', we are constantly being bombarded with PC headlines.

Let's be clear from the outset on what political correctness is. Political correctness occurs when minority groups silence debate on a particular issue to appease their own sensitivities - and to impose their will on the majority of citizens. In other words, a minority group disagrees with an opposing viewpoint so strongly, that it does not want the debate to occur at all. Yet, the suppression of the debate is in itself contrary to the most fundamental of all of our democratic principles, the right to free speech.

Unfortunately over the years, politicians have harnessed political correctness as a device to manipulate the debate towards their own agenda. The effect of that has been to shift society away from one that was based on equal opportunities towards one that is predicated on equal outcomes. As a consequence, the very values that have helped to make New Zealand society strong and successful - entrepreneurship, self-interest, individualism, and the ability to express a view freely and openly - have been eroded.

In any robust debate, there is, of course, a

fine line between being respectful and disrespectful. Unfortunately these days, it appears that everyone has developed a heightened sensitivity to perceived disrespect. The problem is that this over-sensitivity leads society down a path where people are afraid to speak their mind, where winning can no longer be celebrated - because it will create losers - and where mediocrity becomes the norm.

Any society is built on the contributions that have been made by people with a wide variety of talents, beliefs and skills. For a society to be strong, with a collective aspiration for success and achievement, people must be free to express themselves as they see fit. Just as there is little joy in living in a household where everyone has to tiptoe around afraid of upsetting someone, so too it is with a society.

We must be mindful that everyone in our society achieves differently, since each is driven by his or her own hopes and dreams. Our own responsibility however, as we charge ahead at doing the very best that we can with our life, is to

remember not be overly sensitive to comments made by others with honest intent.

There is no better example of all of this than the recent experiences of Josie Bullock (our Guest Commentator in this week's NZCPD Forum). Like the US civil rights icon Rosie Parks who refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man, Josie refused to give up her seat in the front row during a Department of Corrections graduation ceremony for offenders. In doing that, she effectively challenged the politically correct convention of Maori who have a vested interest in perpetrating cultural correctness

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in the public service. And while it is certainly in their commercial interests for Maori to promote cultural equality in New Zealand, whether it is in their social interest is yet to be determined.

The fact that Josie lost her job over this dispute creates an interesting quandary – which is more important: her rights to equal treatment as a woman in her workplace or Maori rights to have women treated as second class citizens? This is the subject of this week's poll.

Political correctness was first used as a mechanism for state control in the former Soviet Union in the 1920s. Soviet ideologues discovered that the secret to controlling the way people think is to control their language: by changing the meaning of words and the use of language, history can be re-written, abnormal behaviour can be normalised, and truth can be replaced by official lies.

Dr Frank Ellis in his book Political correctness and the theoretical struggle explains that the techniques used to achieve these ends, include the use of intimidation, threats and vicious personal attack: "The intention is to use language as a weapon...creating a climate of fear such that incorrect opinion is declared 'illegitimate', 'extreme', or 'racist' and so on".

A key strategy used by PC advocates is to suppress information - refusing to publish or

discuss material that questions the accepted norm. The debate over whether Maori really were the tangata whenua and whether the 'official' version of the Treaty of Waitangi being used by the government is the right one, are good examples, whereby researchers who have raised legitimate questions and produced new information that casts doubts on the government's agenda, are regularly demonized (as are others who dare to raise this issues, I might add from personal experience!).

Anyone who has the courage to speak out on contentious PC issues will find themselves being attacked these days in an effort to silence their opposition. How vicious the attack is will depend on the issue and how big the vested interests are that are being protected.

It is this fundamental attack on the freedom of speech that makes political correctness so dangerous. It is this that we should all be fighting. And it is this that National's new PC eradicator should be attacking.

Every New Zealander should have the right to say what they think without being vilified. It is simply not acceptable that in a free democratic society a small minority group with a self-interested agenda - or indeed a government – can deny people the right to have their say.

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