

The Retreat of Reason

The Retreat of Reason

Political Correctness and the
Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain

Anthony Browne

Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society

London

Registered Charity No. 1085494

First Published January 2006

© The Institute for the Study of Civil Society 2006

77 Great Peter Street

London SW1P 2EZ

Civitas is a registered charity (no. 1085494)
and a company limited by guarantee, registered in
England and Wales (no. 04023541)

Email: books@civitas.org.uk

All rights reserved

ISBN-10 1-903386-47-0

ISBN-13 978-1-903386-47-0

Independence: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society (CIVITAS) is a registered educational charity (No. 1085494) and a company limited by guarantee (No. 04023541). CIVITAS is financed from a variety of private sources to avoid over-reliance on any single or small group of donors.

All publications are independently refereed. All the Institute's publications seek to further its objective of promoting the advancement of learning. The views expressed are those of the authors, not of the Institute.

Typeset by
Civitas

Printed in Great Britain by
Bath Press

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Author</i>	vii
<i>Personal Preface</i>	viii
<i>Summary</i>	xii
1 What is Political Correctness?	1
2 The Hallmarks of Political Correctness	16
3 The Origins of Political Correctness	29
4 The Triumph of Political Correctness	32
5 The Benefits of Political Correctness	40
6 The Drawbacks of Political Correctness	41
7 How Political Correctness Affects Policies	59
8 The Trouble with Discrimination	69
9 The Dissidents from Political Correctness	79
10 How Political Correctness can be Defeated	84
Epilogue	89
Notes	91

*Shake off all the fears and servile prejudices under
which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix
reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal
every fact, every opinion.*

Thomas Jefferson, 1787

*The cardinal sin, when we are looking for truth of
fact or wisdom of policy, is refusal to discuss.*

Sidney Hook, 'The Ethics of Controversy', 1980

Author

Anthony Browne was born and raised in Cambridge, where he gained a mathematics degree. He has been economics correspondent for the BBC and the *Observer*, environment correspondent at the *Observer* and health editor at the *Observer*. He was environment editor at *The Times* and is now the paper's Europe correspondent.

His other books include *The Euro: should Britain join?* and *Do We Need Mass Immigration?* for Civitas, which was awarded Think Tank Publication of the Year in 2003 by *Prospect* magazine. He has also written papers on health policy for the Adam Smith Institute and on consumer policy for the Social Market Foundation.

He is a British immigrant living in Belgium with his Canadian wife and twin babies.

Personal Preface

There is not a truth existing that I fear or would wish unknown to the whole world.

Thomas Jefferson

It was a trivial event—the non-appearance of a pre-recorded interview on the BBC Radio 4’s Today programme—that sparked the train of thought that led to this pamphlet. It wasn’t just that the interview with me was dropped—an act of mercy on the listeners—but the contrast with the interview with a government minister that appeared in its place.

The episode was an example of the increasingly frequent avoidance of public debate in Britain—the ‘politics of denial’—which is more than just a betrayal of the British public. The absence of debate also led the government to announcing an inappropriate policy that would do nothing to tackle the problems it was aimed at.

There was a conspiracy not so much of silence but of denial that stretched across the media and government from the lowest civil servants and reporters to the highest ministers and interviewers. There was endemic dishonesty towards the public, but because everyone was in denial to each other, few realised it because their virtual reality had become the widely acknowledged truth. This received wisdom was in fact easy to disprove—it just required looking at some government tables—but everyone had an emotional investment in not disproving it.

The collective denial so enveloped the media-political elite that they had little idea how detached their world-view was from reality. When I started putting the truth out in the public domain, I was met with an almost universally intolerant and intellectually dishonest response by people who preferred political correctness over factual correctness.

PERSONAL PREFACE

Even many of those who realised the intellectual honesty of what I had been reporting were unable to accept it emotionally, because for most people when intellect and emotion conflict, emotion wins.

The interview on the Today programme was on a highly sensitive subject—the exponential rise of HIV in Britain since Labour was elected in 1997. Figures from the government's Public Health Laboratory Service were being published showing a 25 per cent rise in just one year, with almost all the increase being among heterosexuals. The government and media had been warning for years about the dangers of the new complacency among heterosexuals, ever since the number of heterosexual cases had swept past the number of homosexual ones, a well reported and much commented-on phenomenon. The government minister was responding on the Today programme to the latest increase with a new sexual health campaign telling people to practice safe sex. If teenagers would just wear condoms, it would put a stop to the rise.

But the trouble is that the increase in HIV had virtually nothing to do with British people practicing unsafe sex—it was almost all the result of HIV positive people (mainly Africans) coming to the UK, and being diagnosed with HIV once here.

I first wrote about the issue in a front page story in *The Times*, announcing that African immigration had overtaken gay sex as the main source of new HIV cases in Britain, according to government figures. The government's epidemiologists with whom I had worked on the story had been worried about the reaction. They needn't have bothered. The reaction was incredulity. Clearly, in most people's minds, the story couldn't be true—everyone knew the increase in HIV was because of complacent and promiscuous Britons.

The Department of Health's director of communication, when I spoke to her about it, clearly thought I was bonkers—she was launching this safe sex campaign because

THE RETREAT OF REASON

everyone knew the rise in HIV was the result of unsafe sex.

The only people who phoned me up to thank me about it were HIV doctors, who lived in the real world, not the politically correct virtual one. Their patients were now predominantly (and sometimes exclusively) African immigrants, and yet no one was talking about it. Some doctors told me that when they had tried to bring it up in public with their local health authorities, they had just been shouted at.

One of the government's own medical advisers phoned me up secretly from within the Department of Health thanking me for highlighting the issue, and urging me to carry on: Britain was facing a massive explosion in HIV and ministers and civil servants simply refused to discuss the cause of it. 'Ministers just won't listen because they think it is racist' he said, 'but the public deserve at least honesty.'

Even when the truth became intellectually commonly accepted, media outlets such as the *Guardian* and BBC carried on reporting dishonest accounts, presumably because they had such deeply held emotional beliefs in the issue that they couldn't bring themselves to write honestly about it. A cover story I wrote for the *Spectator* was directly attacked by a news story in my old paper the *Observer*, whose desire to disprove what I had written trumped their inability to do so.

In fact, although their tone was often somewhat sensational, the most intellectually honest media outlets tended to be Britain's much maligned tabloid media. It isn't the only time that Britain's tabloids, so hated by the left, have actually been the torch-bearers for truth by daring to write deeply uncomfortable things that others refuse to.

Two years after my front page story in *The Times*, the denial about the whole issue of HIV finally crumbled. The Public Health Laboratory Service now openly reports that

PERSONAL PREFACE

African immigration is the main cause of new HIV in Britain, and even left-wing media are enabled to report it.

One person told me that, even if it is true that the HIV epidemic is driven by African immigration, it shouldn't be written about because it will just fuel racism. But the result of that conspiracy of silence is that the government follows a policy that does absolutely nothing to combat the growth of HIV in the UK. Tackling the epidemic will fuel racism far less than allowing African immigration to spark an HIV explosion, a development allowed by government policy which is a political gift to the racist British National Party.

The one definite benefit is that the lives of HIV positive immigrants are saved. But if the cost of NHS treatment were spent in Africa, not the UK, it would save between 10 and 100 times more lives.

There is also the human cost: the HIV epidemic that is being imported from Africa is now being transmitted within the UK. In fact, the majority of people who contract HIV from heterosexual sex in Britain are actually catching it from having sex with HIV positive African immigrants. In total, nearly 1,000 people have caught HIV from infected immigrants since Labour came to power, ironically finally giving a rationale to the government's safe sex campaign. That's 1,000 lives blighted, ultimately, by political correctness. Those who defend political correctness must accept that it can come at a heavy price.

But this book is not about the epidemiology of HIV. It is about the intellectual and emotional processes behind that debate, and how they apply across the public discourse and policy spectrum in twenty-first century, politically-correct Britain.

Summary

For centuries Britain has been a beacon of liberty of thought, belief and speech in the world, but now its intellectual and political life is in chains.

Members of the public, academics, journalists and politicians are afraid of thinking certain thoughts. People are vilified if they publicly diverge from accepted beliefs, sacked or even investigated by police for crimes against received wisdom. Whole areas of debate have been closed down by the crushing dominance of the moralistic ideology of political correctness.

Political correctness started as a study of cultural Marxism in Germany in the 1920s, and was adopted by the 1960s counter culture, eager to promote tolerance and alternatives to the conservative values of the time.

Political correctness quickly infiltrated US academia and spread its tentacles across the West. By the early twenty-first century, political correctness had completed its long march through the institutions in Britain, and had ensnared almost all of them, from schools to hospitals, from local government to national government, and from major corporations to the police, army and the church. In 1997, Britain became governed for the first time by a government largely controlled by politically-correct ideology.

Its influence has spread across the entire policy range, not just women's pay and race relations, but education, health, law and order and the environment. It is upheld by a powerful array of lobby groups, from Liberty to Amnesty International, from Friends of the Earth to Refugee Action, and an array of domestic and international laws, charters and treaties.

Starting as a reaction to the dominant ideology, it has become the dominant ideology. It defines the terms and parameters of any national debate. Anything that is not PC is automatically controversial. Across much of the public

SUMMARY

sphere, it has replaced reason with emotion, subordinating objective truth to subjective virtue.

In the early days, political correctness brought benefits as it helped spread decency and consideration to the more vulnerable members of society, from the handicapped to women to ethnic minorities.

But, as political correctness spread and deepened its influence, it became more dogmatic and intolerant of dissent, until it became a betrayal of the very liberalism that first fuelled it. It has led to new political censorship laws being introduced to curb freedom of speech, and membership of legal democratic parties being curtailed. Rather than opening minds, it is closing them down.

The aim of political correctness is to redistribute power from the powerful to the powerless. It automatically and unquestioningly supports those it deems victims, irrespective of whether they merit it, and opposes the powerful, irrespective of whether they are malign or benign. For the politically correct, the West, the US and multinational corporations can do no good, and the developing world can do no wrong.

Political correctness is often ridiculed, but it is more than just a joke. With its earlier benefits already won, it has now become a hindrance to social progress, and a threat to society. By closing down debates, it restricts the ability of society to tackle the problems that face it.

PC promoted multiculturalism in the Netherlands while silencing debate about its drawbacks, until the results exploded in religious violence leaving much of the country living in fear. In Britain, it allowed the creation of alienated Muslim ghettos which produce young men who commit mass murder against their fellow citizens. By promoting the rights of criminals over their victims, it hinders law enforcement and leads to escalating crime. By challenging the authority of teachers, it fuels poor discipline in schools, and by promoting equality over excellence, it degrades the standard of education and

THE RETREAT OF REASON

inflates exam grades until they become almost meaningless.

By silencing debate and curbing objective analysis, political correctness can harm those it intends to help. The victims are taught to blame others for their vulnerability, discouraging them from taking responsibility for improving their lives if their problems are self-inflicted.

Black communities are encouraged to blame racist teachers for the failure of their boys at school, rather than re-examine their own culture and attitudes to education that may be the prime reasons. The poor sick have ended up having worse healthcare in Britain than they would in mainland Europe because PC for long closed down debate on fundamental NHS reform. Women's employment opportunities can be harmed by giving them ever more rights that are not given to men. The unemployed are encouraged to languish on benefits blaming others for their fate. Poor Africans are condemned to live in poverty so long as they and their governments are encouraged to blame the West for all their problems, rather than confronting the real causes of poor governance, corruption and poor education.

Political correctness once had a purpose, but it now causes much more harm than good. For the last few decades, reason has been in retreat—but the time has come for reason to advance once again.