

DEMOCRACY'S A FUNNY THING. WE ALL HAVE RIGHTS THAT WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO STAND UP FOR, AND WE MAY REVEL IN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. EXCEPT THAT THE COMBINATION OF THOSE TWO TENETS CAN PROVE EXPLOSIVE. WHAT'S A RIGHT-THINKING INDIVIDUAL TO DO?

TRUTH BE TOLD

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As younger generations grow up to understand the world around them, it appears as though, at the same time, they develop a sense of rebellion to certain rules and boundaries. Examples of this include testing copyright laws with the resources in place to download music without paying, and using the internet to converse, debate and express themselves freely. Bring up the topic of political correctness, and most young people are either unaware of the concept or dread the idea of being politically incorrect. But with PC being taken to new levels, maybe it's not such a bad thing, being against the masses.

The way we use language to express ourselves is so natural we don't give a second thought to it most of the time. Freedom of speech is recognised not only as a human right, but also as part of any democratic society. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

WRITING ON THE TRUTHOUT WEBSITE, ROBERT SKIDELSKY EXPLAINED ABOUT THE only two limitations enforced against this law. 'The first prohibited the use of words or expressions likely to disrupt public order; the second was the law against libel. There are good grounds for both – to preserve the peace, and to protect individuals' reputations from lies. Most free societies accept such limits as reasonable,' he said.

If this is the case, then why do we sugar-coat our personal opinions when we have the right to express them freely? For a number of reasons. There is the fear of being judged by those who do not hold the same views, and the fact that, despite it being an opinion, there is the chance that what we think could offend the person we're speaking to.

The positive aspect of political correctness, of course, hones in on eradicating hate speech and racism, but in the process of fighting against this, people have become somewhat sensitive. The deep

need not to offend anybody may strip away the very essence of who we are as humans; opinionated beings who question, debate and believe in ideologies that resonate with us.

Anthony Browne, author of *The Retreat of Reason: Political Correctness and the Corruption of Public Debate in Modern Britain*, explained to the *Daily Mail* five years ago that political correctness had transformed society into a form of 'soft totalitarianism'. This in turn has led to 'moral cowardice' and 'intellectual dishonesty'.

When you consider the effort we put into making sure we don't say something out of line, or that could be misconstrued as offensive, Browne has a valid point. If we think that the celebrations held by Americans after the reported death of Osama Bin Laden were in poor taste, then we should be able to express this freely. If we believe that the likes of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan should be put behind bars with a hefty sentence for their driving infractions, then we should say so. What you may think is an acceptable approach to voicing your opinions is actually holding back the raw truth of your feelings and giving into Browne's theory and, in a way, censoring yourself. PC can sometimes strike a little fear into people, especially at work. *Rethinking Political Correctness* by Robin J. Ely, Debra E. Meyerson and Martin N. Davidson reveals the thought processes of individuals in the workplace, and how PC can dominate your thought processes. It opens by saying: 'A white manager fears she will be perceived as racist if she gives critical feedback to her Latino subordinate. A black engineer passed over for promotion wonders whether his race has anything to do with it, but he's reluctant to raise his concern lest he be seen as "playing the race card".'

PEOPLE FINDING THEMSELVES IN THESE situations can be terrified even to approach the most trivial issues with others. Living in a democratic country

should not mean having to censor yourself when it comes to speech and opinions. But if this is the case, then maybe we haven't been living with democracy as we previously thought.

Even though political correctness has aimed to decrease the use of racist language and discrimination, Browne also touches on the fact that minorities sometimes use racism as an excuse, which suggests that PC has evolved into something much more negative. '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,' he explains.

It's also worth noting that PC consistently changes too, and the

media has a lot to do with that. Despite the well-known saying never to believe everything you read, there is no doubt that the media industry serves as a huge influencer over the people who consume it. We absorb the news we see, believe that interviewees are the most credible sources, and by giving 'the other side' a chance to have their say, we neither question nor accuse media bodies of being biased.

After the death of Princess Diana in 1997, the popularity of the royal family was at an all-time low, and the media fed this to people. But with the recent wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton, the media have clung on to the jubilation people showed throughout the wedding, and now give us close coverage of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's every move. Instead of talking about how taxpayers are affected by both the wedding and their North American tour, the focal point is the fashion angle, with the Duchess now deemed a style icon.

DURING THEIR TOUR OF CANADA, DEMONSTRATORS HELD UP BANNERS REFERRING to the royals as 'parasites', highlighting the fact that it is costing the Canadian taxpayer to fund their visit. Their negative reaction to the

couple isn't shared with the majority, who are happy to have them visit, and so marginalises the protesters, and casts a negative light on them as they're not conforming to how the mainstream is reacting.

Even after the horrific 9/11 attacks, the American media promoted a very patriotic sense of unity. Anyone who didn't conform to that, or didn't support decisions made by former president George W. Bush, were regarded as enemies of the state. His famous line 'You're either with us or against us' was the foundation for several debates.

When assessing our own opinions and thoughts on various topics, individually we have views that are

unlikely to change or be hindered. However, as political correctness shifts, there is the argument that it exists to serve an agenda that goes far beyond curbing racism and discrimination. People, and especially the media, have seen just how effective political correctness has been in its primary use. They've seen how people are scared to be labelled racist and, as a result, they use the idea of political correctness to coax people into feeling, thinking and believing things that they may not be completely comfortable with. It has also had a lasting effect in the way that it makes us think twice about what we say. While this may not be such a bad thing, it does border on stomping on our rights if we can't express ourselves truthfully.

BROWNE BRINGS IT BACK FULL CIRCLE TO THE WAY WE LIVE OUR SOCIAL LIFE, WITH political correctness playing a big part. 'By challenging the authority of teachers, it fuels poor discipline in schools, and by promoting equality over excellence, it degrades the standard of education, inflating exam grades until they become almost meaningless.'

We should be able to voice opinions that may be controversial, and be allowed the chance to explain our feelings without being accused of being something we're not. Using political correctness as a shield not only shows an unwillingness to give people that chance, it can also be seen as a brick wall that is put up knowing very well that an opposing argument may hold more substance and meaning than what is being fed to the mainstream.

'By closing down debates,' Browne says, 'it restricts the ability of society to tackle the problems that face it.' ■

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