

# Talking Sense about Political Correctness

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Over the last seven years or so the expression 'political correctness' has entered the political lexicon in the English-speaking world. Hundreds of opinion pieces in newspapers and magazines have been written about it in addition to scores of academic articles and debates in which the expression has gained currency. It is close to being received opinion in Anglo-American popular culture that a coalition of feminists, ethnic minorities, socialists and homosexuals have achieved a hegemony in the public sphere so as to make possible their censorship, or at least the effective silencing, of views which differ from a supposed 'politically correct' orthodoxy. Correspondingly, it has become a popular tactic, especially in conservative political circles, to accuse one's political opponents of being 'politically correct'.

In this article I will explore a number of ideas about political correctness, particularly as it relates to the regulation and politics of speech.<sup>1</sup> Although individually these arguments seem straightforward and uncontroversial, when combined they reveal that the idea of a politically correct, left-wing dominated, media or intelligentsia in western political culture is a conservative construction. The rhetoric of political correctness is a right-wing discourse used to silence dissenting political viewpoints. This article focuses on the discourse of political correctness used by the right and its aim is to provide a qualified defence of the discourse of the left. This investigation suggests that a politics of speech is an inevitable fact of social life and that some sorts of censorship are likewise inevitable. The question of censorship is therefore revealed as not whether we should tolerate all sorts of speech but which sorts of speech should we tolerate?

In the United States, political correctness is used to refer to a whole series of progressive initiatives concerning changes to the literary canon taught at universities, the teaching of postmodern and critical literary theory and cultural studies, affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities as well as women, sexual assault and harassment and regulations regarding campus 'hate speech'.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, political correctness has some currency in the conservative attack on multiculturalism and on attempts to rectify the injustices perpetrated in the past and continuing in the present against Aboriginal Australians. Contemporary usage of the term suggests that its application has widened to refer to progressive politics as a whole. Despite such wider uses, however, its primary meaning in the Australian context is to refer to the criticism and regulation of speech. The coherence and implications of this sense of political correctness is central to this discussion.

There are two distinct discourses of political correctness currently in existence in Australia, although one is rapidly being replaced by the other. Both purport to describe the same phenomenon, albeit in very different ways. One of these may be characterised as a discourse from the left that embraces political correctness as the effort to be careful in our use of language in order not to exclude members of

social groups such as women, non English speakers, homosexuals or the disabled from full political and civic participation. More generally, they seek to avoid expressing disrespect, whether intentionally or unintentionally, for members of oppressed or marginalised social groups.<sup>3</sup> Those concerned with the politics of speech in this fashion tend to be concerned with social justice more broadly and are willing to enlist the state and redistributive welfare spending in the attempt to overcome the disadvantages facing various oppressed and minority groups.<sup>4</sup>

The discourse from the right is gradually dominating the 'left' discourse, and is hostile to political correctness. From this perspective, it is understood as an attempt by the left to impose a certain political vision on an unwitting community and to silence dissenting political opinion. According to the right, there are some things that people are not allowed to say, or are perhaps too frightened to say, because of the hegemony of a feminist, gay and anti-racist politics in the universities, media and intelligentsia. This notion of political correctness gained currency through the writings and activities of a number of high-profile conservative and neo-conservative authors in the United States such as Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball and Nat Hentoff, sometimes with the benefit of funding from conservative Christian think-tanks. Its proponents are often religious traditionalists or cultural conservatives, typically hostile to feminism, socialism and homosexuality and opposed to affirmative action programs and other redistributive social welfare programs.<sup>5</sup>

To understand political correctness, it is necessary to distinguish between criticism and censorship. Much of the debate around political correctness treats the issue as one of censorship but most of what is labelled political correctness by the right is merely criticism of opposing viewpoints, rather than the demand that the state should intervene to prevent a view from being heard. For instance, criticism of a film for being sexist or racist will be labelled as an attempt to enforce political correctness and is characterised as an attempt to censor an exercise of 'free speech'. There is, however, a large gap between criticising something and saying that it should be censored. Even if a critic's review said something along the lines of 'this is a terrible film. It is a sexist film. It should have never have been made and, now that it has been made, no-one should go and see it', this is still a far cry from saying that the government should have intervened to prevent it from being made or distributed.

It is quite common for people to make the most damning criticism of an intellectual position they dislike but defend the right of their opponents to voice it. This is, after all, a standard liberal concept. There are obvious dangers involved in censorship due to the nature of state power. Criticism is not censorship — it is a normal and necessary part of political debate. The slide between criticism and censorship is part of what makes the right-wing discourse of political correctness so powerful. No-one likes a censor. Usually, however, it is a dishonest slide. On the left, calls for state-backed censorship are uncommon. Most of what is labelled political correctness is just political criticism and, in these cases, discussion of the evils of censorship is fallacious. Recognising this distinction alone is sufficient to dismiss a substantial proportion of the uses of the term.

In many cases, when the right condemns political correctness, their real target is political criticism. This hostility to criticism is, however, selective. When people

are critical of a racist's public statements they are guilty of political correctness and, by implication, of siding with the censors. When racists express their racist sentiments they are exercising their freedom of speech. This convenient flexibility as to what counts as censorship and what counts as free speech contributes to the effectiveness of the right-wing discourse of political correctness as a powerful rhetorical tool.

It is possible for a repressive orthodoxy to grow up in a community; governments are not the only source of censorship. There is also the possibility of what John Stuart Mill described as 'the despotism of custom' acting to effectively silence dissent.<sup>6</sup> This informal but equally effective censorship may even be more pernicious than state censorship, which at least has the virtues of being explicit and usually heavy-handed. Certain opinions might be so widely and strongly held in a community that dissident views are subject to such a barrage of criticism that they cannot be heard or people may become too intimidated to voice them. This is what has happened according to conservative critics of political correctness<sup>7</sup> who, although not themselves racist, embrace the open expression of racist opinions: they admire speakers saying what others have been too scared to say, supposedly because of their fear of a torrent of condemnation from political correctness critics.

It is ironic that the conservative attack on political correctness concedes that criticism — mere speech — has the power to influence and to silence others in politically significant ways. This is the starting point of a left-wing concern with the politics of speech. In the debate surrounding political correctness, the left and the right agree, contrary to traditional liberals, that the things we say and the rhetorics we use to express them may limit the possibilities for other different viewpoints to be expressed and are, therefore, a proper subject for public political concern. They differ on their assessments of who is in danger of being silenced and marginalised and what sorts of discursive practices are responsible for this silencing. In reality, the vast majority of both formal (state) and informal (social) censorship originates on the right.<sup>8</sup>

Many types of speech are already forbidden. Governments have made it a crime to voice certain opinions in public and continue to do so.<sup>9</sup> In most jurisdictions around the world, legislation exists to forbid speech that encourages criminal activities or incites riots, or that defames, libels or threatens the national interest. Censorship of film and literature which offends community standards goes on under the auspices of various boards of censors such as the Office of Film and Literature Classification.<sup>10</sup> Such censorship, by appointed panels of government officials or 'upstanding' members of the community, explicitly prevents materials that allegedly offend prevailing community standards from reaching the public. This has included such things as explicit representations of sexuality, writing about forms of sexual experience, attacks on Christian churches, communist 'propaganda' and other materials deemed blasphemous, seditious or obscene.<sup>11</sup> Censorship on conservative grounds has been enforced vigorously for most of recent history and continues to occur.

Rather than being the work of feminists, socialists or homosexuals, the interests protected by this legislation are overwhelmingly conservative, which explains why there is little discussion of these restrictions on freedom of speech

in discussions of political correctness. Besides this array of legal prohibitions, the threat to freedom of speech from the left looks insignificant. There is not any comparable state-backed program of regulation of speech which is motivated by left-wing concerns. In various jurisdictions around the world, legislation exists which is intended to deter incitement to racial hatred. This legislation extends to members of ethnic groups a similar protection from harm as is granted to the nation as a whole. The idea that speech can be regulated to protect a group from harm is already accepted across the political spectrum. The only thing new about legislation against incitement to racial hatred is that the group which is protected is sub-national. Compared to legislation which exists to protect the national interest or the reputation of public figures from defamation, the legislation protecting members of racial groups from vilification is also typically weaker, invokes smaller penalties and is used less often.<sup>12</sup>

Critics of political correctness might admit that the main threat of censorship does not arise from the state legislating in the public sphere but instead originates from what they perceive as a rising tide of efforts to impose formal, but non-state, censorship in institutions such as schools, universities and the press. There have been various attempts to introduce guidelines and, in some cases, regulations into these institutions concerning campus hate speech, gender inclusive language use and sexual harassment. Concern for the public culture of institutions is hardly a recent phenomenon or exclusively, or even mainly, the prerogative of the left. There have always been standards about what it was appropriate to teach and say and do in schools and universities. Repeated conservative outcries when sex or drug education groups try to publish materials that talk openly about gay sex or drug use, or introduce them into the education system, serve to remind us that an enthusiasm for censorship from the right in these forums continues to this day.<sup>13</sup>

Popular political pressure has often been brought to bear on institutions to prevent 'inappropriate' voices being heard and most maintain formal mechanisms of censorship which can be mobilised if radical voices are raised too loudly or too often. Most university statutes, for instance, contain provisions that allow that staff may be dismissed and students expelled for conduct which brings the university into disrepute. Schools have codes of behaviour which they expect students to conform to under the threat of expulsion. Most non-government publications that receive government funding are subject to formal restrictions as to the purposes to which the funding can be used or at least face the prospect of the withdrawal of their funding if they offend the (conservative) powers that be too grossly. Even in the supposedly left-wing arena of schools, universities and the media, it would be difficult to argue that the major threat of censorship arises from the left.

The real threat to freedom of speech may come not from the government directly or in the universities or the media but in the workplace. In some jurisdictions, laws have been passed concerning workplace sexual harassment which establish penalties for verbal or written sexual harassment such as unsolicited sexual comments, propositions or innuendo. Or, as a result of pressure from the women's movement, corporations have developed policies, targeting speech of this sort, that are designed to curb sexual harassment. The existence of such policies is claimed by the right as evidence of political correctness, though

regulation of speech in the workplace is nothing new and it is not solely, or even mostly, from the left. There is a great deal of almost entirely conservative censorship that occurs in the workplace as a result of the restrictions placed on workers when they enter the wage-labour agreement. Along with the other freedoms which workers agree to forgo in return for an income goes freedom of speech. In some cases the restrictions on the speech of workers is explicit, such as when workers are forbidden to distribute union materials in the workplace and when union officials are denied contact with workers. These restrictions operate only in the workplace and leave workers free to speak their minds outside of working hours.

Restrictions that bind workers outside the workplace and working hours are also common. Many workers in the public and corporate sectors are bound by confidentiality and privacy agreements that restrict their right to speak inside and outside of the workplace. Even in the absence of such formal regulations, informal prohibitions limit what can be said. The sorts of speech forbidden by these informal edicts are not racist or sexist remarks but criticisms of management, complaints about working conditions or advocacy of unionisation. These limitations do not need to be made formal conditions of the employment contract because they are implicit in the power relation between workers and management.

Workers who argue with or are disrespectful to their bosses, who speak up in defence of their wages and conditions, or who express their true opinions about their firm's products or services to customers can jeopardise their employment. Workers are aware of what they can and cannot say within the workplace without risk of dismissal and are made aware of these limits by their employer. Those who continue to voice 'incorrect' sentiments can be reprimanded or dismissed. Because they occur in the private sphere of contract between worker and owner, these restrictions on liberty are one of the least acknowledged sources of censorship but they prohibit free speech in a significant discursive sphere.

Outside formal or state-sanctioned censorship, a prevailing climate of opinion may serve to silence dissent just as effectively as the law. Does a repressive left-wing orthodoxy exist in Australia or anywhere in the world where political correctness has currency? Is the media or even the university system dominated by feminists, socialists, Asians, Aborigines and homosexuals? Are men, the business community, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) and heterosexuals scared to voice their opinions for fear of being howled down by a political correctness mafia? When members of these groups have their say, is it the case that they are consistently ignored, dismissed, laughed at or otherwise not heard? They are occasionally criticised, usually when they attack the rights or interests of members of less privileged groups and sometimes — even more occasionally — widely so, when they do so out of ignorance or malice. These criticisms hardly silence them or prevent them from being heard. The media circus that typically surrounds those who are openly racist often unwittingly provokes them to speak more loudly and allows them to be heard more often. The idea that a repressive left-wing orthodoxy exists in public culture seems laughable.<sup>14</sup>

A more convincing case can be made for the existence of a conservative political culture or orthodoxy that marginalises and silences progressive concerns. If one wants a demonstration of the presence of political correctness in Australian

culture then there is no better way to get it than to walk down to the local bar and start talking loudly and proudly about one's gay lover or walk down the wrong street arm in arm with one's same sex partner. Unless one is lucky, the importance of not straying outside the bounds of accepted opinion will be impressed on you, sometimes more forcefully than with a few politely spoken words of criticism.

Less dramatic examples can be found in the fate of feminism and socialism in mainstream political culture. Allegiance to either of these ideologies is arguably politically incorrect in the current climate. Identifying oneself as either a feminist or a socialist more or less guarantees hostility, trivialisation and ridicule in most forums outside of the academy (and some within it). Many people are reluctant to identify themselves as such because of the misunderstandings and difficulties it causes. If they are not openly laughed at, they are at least not taken seriously. These and other issues are certainly not addressed. They are not fashionable. They are not politically correct.

Like other western political cultures, Australia maintains a vigorous, if largely unnoticed, sense of political correctness that is conservative, white, racist, male-oriented and homophobic. It was precisely in recognition of this that some on the left became concerned with issues about the politics of representation and of language use. In the current period the right-wing discourse of political correctness plays a key role in maintaining this conservative social environment. Increasingly, criticism of the existing sexist and racist culture is labelled as just more political correctness and is dismissed. Sometimes it will even be described as 'the dictates of the thought police', 'intellectual fascism' or 'Stalinist'.<sup>15</sup> Painting one's critics as politically correct today achieves a number of powerful conservative rhetorical effects. It valorises the conservative position by making it appear as though it were a courageous and free-thinking challenge to a repressive orthodoxy rather than the banal expression of bigotry. It distracts attention from the content of the criticism and reduces it to merely another attempt by those with totalitarian tendencies to censor free speech and in this way mitigates the need to respond to it. When people come to see that to speak out against sexism and racism means being misrepresented, ridiculed, dismissed and likened to Hitler and Stalin, they are less likely to do so. In this way the language of political correctness, as used by the right, itself serves to silence dissent.<sup>16</sup>

Almost no-one in the political spectrum is willing to advocate that there should be no limits on public speech. If the left would like to see racist, sexist or homophobic hate speech outlawed and other less explicit forms of sexism, racism and homophobia discouraged, the right is by no means short of targets for the repressive force of the law or public opinion. Enthusiasm for censorship is not simply a trait of extremists at either end of the political spectrum: the prospect of immediate and substantial harm to others occurring as the direct result of an act of speech is considered by almost everyone to justify censorship of some sort. Few people are prepared to defend the right of a newspaper to personally vilify a public figure or deliberately publish lies about a community or business project or to expose carefully constructed and concealed national defence plans. Certain sorts of speech can harm important interests and this is generally recognised to justify restrictions on those types of speech. Some sorts of speech destroy the very fabric of the community that makes speech possible.

Critics of political correctness like to portray the debate surrounding it as a conflict between moralistic censors on one side and staunch defenders of freedom of speech on the other, but this is a misportrait. Change the sort of speech being defended and the staunch defenders of free speech become firm believers in the need for speech restrictions. The real debate around censorship is not about whether it is justified in some circumstances, because everyone agrees on this; it is about what justifies it. Once the debate is understood in this light, it becomes possible to discuss whether or not harm caused to members of minority groups by certain sorts of speech might justify restrictions on speech in the same way as harm caused by libel or defamation to individuals justifies restrictions on our freedom to libel or defame, or in the same way that the national interest justifies censorship.<sup>17</sup>

Not only is there an explicit consensus on the necessity of state and other sorts of formal censorship, but there is also an implicit consensus, expressed in practice, on the important and necessary role played by various types of informal censorship. In personal conversation we place restrictions on the people that we are willing to talk to. If someone is abusive or ill-mannered or talks nonsense then we point this out and, if they persist, we walk away. A certain level of respect for other speakers is necessary in order to maintain a conversation. In addition to respect for the participants in a dialogue, we also recognise the need for respect for various conventions about contributions to a discussion. In order for a dialogue or debate to flourish, contributions to it must be relevant, well informed, clearly expressed, productive, intelligent and otherwise suitable. Contributions that are ignorant, stupid, obstructive, or irrelevant hamper debate and frustrate participants.

In ordinary political practice we recognise the need for restrictions on the sort of material that is published in a given medium or tolerated in a particular forum. Editors select the material that they publish. Radio stations choose who they interview. Chairpersons guide discussion towards the relevant issues and move to silence those who continue to dispute an issue after it has been resolved or whose contributions are otherwise unproductive.<sup>18</sup> These sorts of limits on speech abound because speech is always for something. Speech is important to us not because we simply like to make noise but because we are involved in common projects with those we are speaking to. We are trying to decide a certain issue, to find the truth about something, or to resolve our disagreements without recourse to violence or debating legislation. Speech is a means rather than an end in itself, but some sorts of speech, in some circumstances, do not serve these ends and then the very same grounds we have for defending open debate works to justify silencing speech.<sup>19</sup>

The grounds we have for making these decisions are always political; that is, they necessarily involve reference to our commitments about the issues at hand. The best way to recognise a stupid argument is that it consistently leads to stupid conclusions. Judgements about the relevance or irrelevance of a contribution to a debate cannot be divorced from an understanding of relevant issues. Assessment of what counts as a productive contribution depends on what we think the debate is about and where it should go. In this way we constantly make political judgements about what sorts of opinions should be heard or criticised. There is a



consensus on the need for informal forms of censorship just as there is for some formal censorship.

Ideas about the nature of communication and the concept of freedom of speech also impact on the debate. Semiotics suggests that absolute freedom of speech is an incoherent notion. Structuralism and poststructuralism indicate that the meaning of signs is a function of the play of difference within a system of signs. The meaning of a word will be determined as much by what we cannot do with it as what we can. The limits on our expression are simultaneously the enabling conditions of what we can express. This means that absolute freedom of expression is an impossibility. A person who is free to say absolutely anything, to express any unique concept, because they are not limited by the range of meanings they have available to them could, paradoxically, say nothing at all. Communication requires restrictions; that our concepts have more or less determinate meanings. Our ability to say what we can is founded on our inability to say what we cannot.<sup>20</sup>

This may be grammatical correctness or speaking properly rather than political correctness. When these restrictions are uncontroversial they simply appear as rules of grammar or conventions of proper speech. Even if it is not challenged, however, the structure of language is neither devoid of political implications nor untainted by politics. The system of differences which gives our words their meaning has political implications because it makes it easier to say some things and harder to say others. Some ideas will be easy to express in a given language because the system of differences is structured to capture them. Others will be difficult to convey and even to formulate because the language is founded on their exclusion. Even if it is possible to overcome these difficulties by constructing some complex phrasing to capture our intended meaning, the more elaborate elocutions we construct from ill suited words do not have the same force as the single words or snappy slogans of those whose ideas are already represented in the language. Some political claims are therefore advantaged and others disadvantaged.<sup>21</sup>

The existence of the debate about political correctness is itself evidence of the political significance of language. If the structure of language had no political implications, if it genuinely did not matter whether a person running a committee was called the 'chair' or the 'chairman', then the debate about political correctness would never have arisen. The vehemence of the right's response to suggestions that we should change the way we speak is evidence that there is a political issue at stake. The current shape of our language is political in origin because the meanings available to us for our expression are themselves determined by the past and present usage of others. Language is a social product and we all participate, although not always to the same extent, in its creation and the determination of the meaning of words.

Not all meanings suit everyone equally. Some people will prefer a word to mean one thing, some another. Sometimes the attempt to impose a preferred meaning on a term will become the site of an explicitly political struggle, as in the current debate around political correctness. This debate is, amongst other things, a struggle over the meanings of words and the possibilities of expression. It is clearly a political struggle consciously engaged in by parties with political



agendas that are, in some cases, supported by organised political lobby groups.<sup>22</sup> Even when such explicitly political struggle does not occur, each usage of a word is a small act in a history which determines the meaning of that word and its possible future usages. Each usage enables some other usages and constrains others. No usage of a word is devoid of consequences for the ways in which others may use it. Every usage occurs in a political context which partially determines which usages will carry authority and successfully achieve their intended affects and which will not.<sup>23</sup>

There is always a politics of speech — a struggle over the correct ways to use language. Although its political dimensions may go unnoticed until a controversy erupts, this is not something the left has invented. It has always existed because of the way language works. Saying that one stands simply for freedom in this arena is nonsensical, because any and every usage will increase our freedom to use a word in certain ways and decrease our freedom to use it in others. This is not to say that there are not better and worse ways to use words, just that these will not be distinguished by the extent to which they impinge on the ability of others to use them differently. It is the meaning of a word that is important— not the fact that it has one.

The same argument is true at the level of culture and politics. Any political climate or culture promotes some ways of life and political opinions and discriminates against others. Culture is a community's set of conclusions and received opinions about the best way to live life, order society and behave towards others. It is impossible for a culture to include all forms of life and all expressions of opinion. This is not just a practical impossibility: it is a conceptual one. Cultures have a determinate content; they espouse world-views and they express ways of life and these function to exclude other cultures. For example, we cannot have a culture where racist statements go unremarked and where the moral claims of racial minorities to full citizenship are taken seriously. Part of taking racial justice seriously is to be offended and to want to respond when people make racist remarks.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, we cannot have a culture where homosexuality is publicly accepted and where children are 'protected' from the idea that homosexuality is a valid sexual preference. As these examples make clear, facts about culture have political consequences. Culture determines what sort of behaviour is expected from people and what sorts of speech and behaviour will cause castigation and outrage. A society without political correctness would be a society without culture. It would be a society without shame, manners or customs. It would be a society where anything was possible and nothing frowned upon. It would be a society without values.<sup>25</sup>

Some form of political correctness is an inevitable fact of social life. It is impossible not to limit the possibilities of expression in a culture. The issue is whether one prefers to defend free speech for sexists, racists and homophobes and to diminish the possibilities for the voices of women, people of colour, immigrants and gay men and lesbians to be heard, or to defend the rights of members of those groups to be heard by condemning sexism, racism and homophobia.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the conservative case is that it is wrong for the government, or for any social group, to consciously concern itself with language and culture in this way.

This claim would deserve more attention if the continuing outcry about political correctness was not so obviously the result of conservative groups and, to a certain extent, various national governments, doing just that. Their hostility to political correctness is motivated by a conscious concern for the political and intellectual climate in which they find themselves. They are consciously trying to turn back the cultural clock to the 1950s, when people had pride in the nation, faith in the wisdom of government and business, and when women were too busy trying to achieve equal pay, and Indigenous peoples the right to vote, to attack the government for its sexist and racist language.<sup>27</sup>

There is, however, something very Orwellian about a government which is trying to change the way in which people use language in order to change the way they think. A large part of our hostility to the idea of a government that is consciously involved in shaping culture stems from justified concerns about the appropriateness and the consequences of involving state power in this process. Bureaucracies are not very good at shaping cultures and the instruments they have to do so are sometimes clumsy and often dangerous. To acknowledge these considerations is not to concede that the state should simply not be concerned with culture. It is simply not possible to avoid engaging in cultural politics. Doing nothing is a policy with cultural and political consequences. State action, even if disguised as inaction, inevitably impinges upon culture.

The question, then, is should it do so consciously or unconsciously? To remain unconscious of our responsibility for the culture in which we live is, in most cases, to adopt a conservative politics towards it. By failing to take conscious action we tacitly support the status quo. To say that the state should not be conscious of the effects of its actions on culture is to consciously recommend that it should pursue a conservative politics. Given that the state is necessarily implicated in a politics of culture, there is no *prima facie* reason to suggest that the state should favour a conservative rather than a progressive politics in this area. This needs to be debated on the merits of the politics rather than stonewalled by insisting that the state has no role in determining culture.

Criticism of some formulations of political correctness advanced by the left is also possible on other grounds. To begin with, political correctness is obviously not a label that one should rush to embrace. Telling people that they should be politically correct is setting oneself up for the accusations of smug superiority or totalitarianism that the right promotes, which is why it has pushed the rhetoric of political correctness so insistently. If we wish to consciously promote a certain politics of speech we should instead simply insist that one should not be racist or sexist. Instead of talking about politically correct language we should criticise racism or sexism. This puts the onus on the right to explain why the speech at issue is not bigoted or why we should tolerate it. This is safer rhetorical ground than being forced to defend political correctness.

More importantly, concern about the politics of speech and culture should not distract our attention from the inequalities of political, economic and social power which underlie them. Changing the names by which we refer to things does not in itself change the things themselves. Political action addressing the social, economic and political inequalities that result in the marginalisation of certain groups in language and culture is necessary. While the marginalisation of

oppressed groups in language and culture works to maintain their oppression and reinforce their marginalisation, it is not clear that addressing the problems at the level of language will in itself have much affect on deeper political, social and economic injustices. Nonetheless, addressing these injustices is likely to greatly accelerate the process of the transformation of language and culture. It would be wise then to concentrate on this latter project.<sup>28</sup>

To an extent, the current interest in the politics of language and culture is the result of the retreat of the left into the academy and bureaucracy, where it has been unable to exercise much influence over more traditional political matters. Unable or unwilling to participate in any mass based movement which might transform the political and economic structure of society, the left has been concerned with new speech codes or (more creditably) legislation outlawing discrimination. The irrelevance of these initiatives to the problems of low wages, unemployment, the rising cost of living and homelessness facing members of the very groups they are intended to serve goes a long way towards explaining the strength of the backlash against political correctness even amongst members of these groups.

A complex set of issues about the value and function of state power is also raised by proposals that progressives should enlist the state in their efforts to transform culture. The state is a conservative institution that is both disinclined and ill suited to achieve many of the left's goals. Attempts to use the state to promote a tolerant culture or to restrict racist and sexist speech could backfire and any resulting legislation could be employed by the right against those very groups it was intended to serve. Unless one is prepared to argue that this is inevitably the fate of any and all attempts by the left to win political ground via the state — which would be foolish — then this will need to be argued on the details of each proposed piece of legislation. Legislating from above also looks unlikely to achieve the deep social consensus that is necessary to ensure a genuinely non racist or sexist society. It may even generate resentment that results in political effects contrary to its intentions.

Conversely, legislation also functions as a statement of social consensus and can send a clear message that certain sorts of behaviour are not welcome in the community. The political struggle to achieve such a consensus may provide a valuable focus for political activity through which to raise the level of political consciousness around the issues in the community at large. For this reason even legislation that is unlikely to be enforced may be worth fighting for.

These criticisms are different to those made on the right. They do not proceed from the disingenuous assumption that attempts to be conscious of the politics of speech and culture involve anything new or necessarily oppressive. Instead, they engage in a genuine debate about the politics of particular attempts to regulate speech. They contest the importance and effectiveness of such regulation rather than the right to engage in it. This does not mean that we should deny that the ability to formulate, express and have an opinion heard is an important political freedom which is crucial to the functioning of a democratic society. Casting aside the illusion of free speech as maintained by the right in favour of an awareness that speech is always already regulated, both formally and informally, enables us to better consider the politics of such regulation. Only by recognising both the existing constraints on speech and the inevitability of some such constraints can

we hope to establish a community in which all those voices whose expression is consistent with the values of our community can be heard as equals.

Some critics may believe that this discussion misses the point, that political correctness has gone too far and that some sections of the left have adopted a victim mentality wherein the slightest deviation from left political orthodoxy is seized upon as evidence of sexism, racism or homophobia: Le Pen's politics are not racist; and referring to a woman by her husband's name is not sexist. The problem with contemporary politically correct intellectual culture is that it is simply too quick to condemn people as bigots for a failure to use the proper political jargon or for stating opinions which are currently unpopular. There may be some truth in this claim. It would be fallacious to claim that no-one has been falsely accused of being sexist or racist. The point is that the debate should go on at this level; as a discussion about whether or not certain statements or positions are somehow bigoted.

This article has discussed the idea that what the right has attempted to characterise as a new tyranny of political correctness is either a gross misrepresentation or just the normal operations of politics, language and culture. Left-wing proponents of political correctness are not advocating anything new when they suggest that some opinions and behaviours should be considered socially unacceptable and cause for criticism. What is new is that, instead of accepting that the bounds of respectable opinion should be defined by reverence for God, Queen, Property and Nation, the left has suggested that they should be delineated by respect for individuals regardless of their race, gender or sexual preference. Whether it should be decided this way or that way is a political question.

Instead of talking about political correctness, we should be talking about politics. We should be arguing about whether certain sorts of speech are sexist or racist and about the consequences of tolerating or regulating them. We should be examining the content of our culture and taking honest stock of whose voices are silenced and whose are promoted. We should celebrate the widespread criticism that occurs when someone puts forward a racist or sexist opinion rather than defending their right to do so as free speech while trying to silence their critics with accusations of censorship. Even when censorship is on the agenda, instead of mouthing off about the evils of it we should admit that we all agree that it is sometimes justified and proceed to discussing whether or not it is justified in particular cases. We could be doing all this without talking about political correctness at all.

The term political correctness serves only to cloud the real issues at stake in debates around the politics of speech, which is why the right have promoted it so vigorously. It confuses criticism with censorship and deliberately mobilises the public's fear of state regulation of speech where this is clearly not at issue. It does this despite the right's extensively documented enthusiasm for using the powers of the state to silence its critics and despite the extensive restrictions on free speech which exist to this day. It ignores the fact that everyone across the political spectrum agrees that some sort of censorship is justified and the more philosophically interesting notion that some form of censorship is necessary to enable productive debate to occur at all. By implicitly opposing political

correctness to political freedom it deliberately obscures the fact that the alternative to a left-wing political correctness is a right-wing political correctness. These confusions and obfuscations are no accident; they serve a political agenda. The main function of the right-wing rhetoric of political correctness is to attempt to further marginalise the left and to silence dissent. Those who do not wish to participate in this silencing should work to expose this rhetoric for what it is.

**Talking Sense about Political Correctness**  
**Robert Sparrow**

- 1 I would like to thank Robert Goodin and Krysti Guest for discussion, comments and support during the writing of this article.
- 2 See John Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995.
- 3 For a brief history of the debate about political correctness in Australia, see Mark Davis, *Gangland*, Allan and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, Chapter 3.
- 4 See: Richard Perry and Patricia Williams, 'Freedom of hate speech', in Paul Berman (ed.), *Debating PC*, Laurel Trade, New York, 1992, pp 225-30; and Alibhai-Brown, op. cit. See also the history of PC politics in the UK provided by Stuart Hall, 'Some "politically incorrect" pathways', in Dunant, op. cit., pp 164-83.
- 5 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987; Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*, The Free Press, New York, 1991, especially Chapter 5, 'The New Censorship'; Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1991; and Nat Hentoff, *Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee*, Harper Collins, New York, 1992.
- 6 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, David Spitz (ed.), Norton and Co, New York, 1975, pp 66-7.
- 7 See D'Souza, op. cit., Chapter 5; Davis, op. cit.
- 8 See Peter Coleman, *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Seditious*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1975; Brian Martin, et al, (eds), *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1986; and Michael Pollack, *Sense and Censorship: Commentaries on Censorship Violence in Australia*, Reed Books, Sydney, 1990.
- 9 As Wilson, op. cit., p 91 notes, the US Supreme Court 'has accepted limits on free speech in cases of immediate harm, captive audiences, criminal threat, obscenity, immediate riot and time, place and manner restrictions.' The relevant cases, according to Wilson, are *Shenck v. United States*, 249 US 47 (1919); *Lehman v. City of Shaker Heights*, 418 US 298 (1974); *Miller v. California*, 413 US 15 (1973), *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 US 44 (1969), *Heffron*, 452 US 640 (1981).
- 10 The Office of Film and Literature Classification is the Commonwealth statutory authority that classifies and censors films, print publications, computer games and internet sites. It does not deal with broadcast media such as television or radio. See [www.oflc.gov.au](http://www.oflc.gov.au).
- 11 See Coleman, op. cit.; Martin, op. cit.; and Pollack, op. cit.
- 12 For an overview of legislation concerning racial vilification within Australia and internationally see Victor Duranti, *Racial Vilification: An Overview of the Issues*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1994.
- 13 For discussion of what he calls 'conservative correctness' on campuses in the US, see Wilson, op. cit., Chapter 2.
- 14 Davis, op. cit.
- 15 See Wilson, op. cit., p 23; and Neilson, op. cit. for lists of such references in the conservative literature on political correctness in higher education.
- 16 Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1994, Chapter 7.
- 17 Fish, op. cit., pp 106-11.
- 18 The guidelines to the procedure of the House of Representatives of the Australian Parliament, House of Representatives Practice, Third Edition, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1997, for example, contain an entire chapter (Chapter 13, pp 458-85).
- 19 See Fish, op. cit., Chapters 8 and 9.
- 20 *ibid.*, p 103.
- 21 Deborah Cameron, 'Words, words, words: The power of language' in Dunant, op. cit.
- 22 See Neilson, op. cit., for an account of how the campaign against political correctness was consciously shaped by the right in the US and involved the provision of substantial funds to conservative ideologues by right-wing foundations and think tanks.
- 23 Cameron, op. cit.; see also J G A Pocock, 'Verbalising a political act', *Political Theory*, vol 1, no 1, 1973, pp 27-45, pp 31-6.
- 24 See the discussion of 'reactive attitudes' in P F Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, London,

Methuen and Co, 1974, pp 1-25.

25 In other circumstances this is a core tenet of conservative politics.

26 Fish, op. cit., Chapter 8.

27 ibid., Chapter 3.

28 Barbara Ehrenreich, 'The challenge for the left', in Berman, op. cit., pp 333-8, p 336.

### Stillness and Intrigue in *The North* and *Sadness* by William Yang Helena Grehan

- 1 This term is used by Edward S Casey to describe the interactive process of belonging, whereby an individual is both inscribed by and inscribes their surrounding landscapes. Edward S Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1997, p 340.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Flamingo, London, 1982, p 27.
- 3 Email correspondence with Jane Goodall, November 1999.
- 4 Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Vintage, London, 1996, p 151.
- 5 Email correspondence with Christine Choo.
- 6 *The Heart of the Journey* was performed at the Luna Cinema in Perth as part of the St Kilda Festival, 24 June 2001.
- 7 Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- 8 In a review of *Sadness*, Greg Leong also found this Taoist ceremony problematic. Greg Leong, review of *Sadness*, in *Agenda*, no 44/45, October 1995, p 45. Dean Chan cites Leong in an important article titled 'The Poetics of Cultural Theory: On hybridity and the new hierarchies,' in Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo and Jacqueline Lo (eds), *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia*, special joint issue of *Journal of Australian Studies* and *Australian Cultural History*, no 19, 2000, pp 52-7.
- 9 William Yang, *Sadness*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p 65.
- 10 Yang, cited in Candida Baker, 'Maximum Exposure', *Australian Magazine*, 31 Jan - 1 Feb 1998, p 21.
- 11 Jacqueline Lo, 'Dis/Orientations: Contemporary Asian-Australian Theatre', in Veronica Kelly (ed.), *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1998, pp 66-7.
- 12 Winterson, op. cit., p 26.
- 13 Quotations from *The North* by William Yang, unpublished script, 1992, p 1.
- 14 ibid.
- 15 Yang, *Sadness*, p 35.
- 16 ibid., p 29. The idea of 'family' and what it means is the focus of Yang's recent monologue BloodLinks.
- 17 *Sadness*, p 31.
- 18 ibid., p 32.
- 19 ibid., p 64.
- 20 ibid., p 65.
- 21 ibid., p 22.
- 22 Jacqueline Lo, 'Beyond happy hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian identities', in Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, et. al., (eds), *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2000, pp 165-66.
- 23 This story appears in both *Sadness*, p 64 and in a slightly different format in *The North*, p 8.
- 24 This feeling of alienation may have been triggered by a sense of cultural as well as sexual confusion. See *The North*, p 8.
- 25 ibid., p 16.
- 26 Ien Ang, 'Migrations of Chineseness', *SPAN*, no 34 and 35, 1992/1993, p 14.
- 27 The question of race, representation and identification is skilfully discussed by Lo in 'Beyond happy hybridity', op. cit., p 156.
- 28 *Sadness*, p 51.
- 29 'Dark play' is a term devised by Richard Schechner to describe adult play that involves risk-taking. Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, Routledge, London, 1990, p 11.