



### **What is 'political correctness' and why does it matter?**

When we speak the truth, we are correct. When we do not speak the truth because it would be politically unacceptable to admit to believing it, we are politically correct.

Here is an example. Jokes trading on national or ethnic quirks were once popular. The better ones drew a laugh because, although exaggerated, they contained a grain of truth. Later it came to be thought that such jokes perpetuate stereotypes. Whether they contain a grain of truth became irrelevant. Such jokes became politically incorrect. Politically correct people may claim, in retrospect, that none of these jokes ever contained a grain of truth. But it is widely thought acceptable for people to make the same jokes at the expense of their own national or ethnic groups. Irish people still get to make Irish jokes, Jewish people still get to make Jewish jokes, etc. Made by the right people, some of the jokes are still regarded as funny. No doubt this is because they still contain a grain of truth. But it is a grain of truth that no longer dare be admitted unless one is politically licensed to admit it (by membership of the group that is the butt of the joke).

The power of political correctness is shown by the fact that this example was difficult to write down. I had to be politically incorrect to explain political correctness. I had to say that jokes about particular nationalities sometimes contain a grain of truth. If I did not say that, then I could not use the example to illustrate political correctness.

This shows an interesting feature of political correctness. Political correctness hides behind denials. Politically correct people insist that the thing they will not say (because it is politically unacceptable to say it) is not true. After all, they have to insist that it is not true in order to avoid admitting to believing it. They have to insist, for example, that there are no national or ethnic quirks to make jokes about; there is not a grain of truth about any nationalities in Little Britain, Father Ted, the Kumars, or Kath and Kim. This is why one will rarely hear someone admit to being politically correct. Instead they will just say that they are correct. And they may even have convinced themselves to believe it.

Perhaps this explains why 'politically correct' has become a term of abuse. Political correctness is intellectually dishonest. It differs from more old-fashioned methods of self-censorship. Before the era of political correctness, people already understood that it was a bad idea to offend or upset people. They had complex systems of manners that involved a certain amount of dishonesty to spare people's feelings. Some truths were not to be spoken in public, in good company, in front of the servants, etc. But this was not political correctness. Why not? Because the refusal to speak offensive truths depended on the time and the place and the occasion. When the people likely to be offended or upset were out of earshot, one could quietly admit one's real beliefs. Political correctness goes further. There is no setting in which a politically correct person can admit that he believes an offensive truth. He has to keep up the denials, perhaps even to himself. This is not just dishonesty but intellectual dishonesty.

This is why political correctness matters. It matters because it deepens our dishonesty. Rather than believing offensive truths but not saying them, we are supposed to go a step further and not believe them in the first place. [590 words]