Has political correctness gone mad? Trevor Phillips and the backlash thesis

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ABSTRACT

The concept of political correctness, or more accurately, anti-political correctness has re-emerged in the last decade as a major interpretive framework in the media. Populist politicians such as Trump in the US and Farage (a key advocate of Brexit) and Johnson in the UK for example routinely draw upon a discourse featuring political correctness as a bete noire. While the attack on PC is typically made by conservatives, I focus in this paper on a left wing critic, Trevor Phillips who argues that the prevasiveness of PC has fueled a populist backlash. It is argued, contrary to Phillips, that it is not PC but an anti-PC discourse that lies behind the success of populist politicians in the UK and US and that the campaign against political correctness plays well with their supporters.

INTRODUCTION

'I fear anyone who dissents from today's pervasive culture of political correctness will be visited by the Thought Police' (Hitchens, 2020).

'Voters seek return to common sense in revolt against political correctness' (Shipman, 2020)
'The woke left is the new Ministry of Truth…Good people are silenced in an Orwellian nightmare where a tyrannical minority decide what we're allowed to say' (Turner, 2020)

'The march of wokeism is an all-pervasive new oppression' (Phillips 2020)

'We've become a timid, mute, fearful society in which everyone must walk on constant eggshells for fear that they will be next for the social media pile-on and politically correct execution' (Morgan, 2020: 327)

It is clear from the above headlines and extract from a recent book that political correctness or wokeism is deemed a major threat. This characteristion of PC and woke is highly influential and clearly resonates with many people.

Here is the description from a popular novel of a conversation Sophie has on a cruise ship with Mr Wilcox after her husband has just discovered that he has lost out to a colleague, an Asian woman in his bid for promotion:
'We all know what its like nowadays', said Mr Wilcox

'What's it like'?

'This country. We all know the score. How it works. People like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip any more'.

Sophie turned to look at Ian. Now surely he would intervene, protest, say something? But he didn't. And so once again she was the one who had to pursue the point.

'When you say people like Ian, I suppose you mean white people'?

Mr Wilcox looking slightly embarrassed for the first time, glanced around at the other listeners, seeking support in their   faces. He didn't really find it but pressed on regardless.

'We don't look after our own any more, do we'? he said. 'If you're from a minority – fine. Go to the front of the queue. Blacks, Asians, Muslims, gays, we can't do enough for them. But take a talented bloke like Ian and it's another story'

'Or maybe', said Sophie 'they just gave the job to the better candidate'.

She regretted saying it immediately. Ian was still silent but she could tell he was smarting and Mr Wilcox had pounced upon her misstep in no time.

'I think you'd better decide he said which is more important to you, your husband or being politically correct'. (Coe, 2018: 166).

In this article, I shall focus on the claim that political correctness is so pervasive that it provoked a backlash which resulted in Brexit and the rise of populist politicians like Trump.

HAS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS GONE MAD?

Although Trevor Phillips has spent much of his life as a fervent campaigner for racial justice and was both Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality and its successor the Equality and Human Rights Commission, he has not been afraid to take up positions which are anathema to many of his former colleagues. He has thus for some time attacked what he sees as shibboleths on the left, shifting for example from an advocate of multiculturalism to a radical critic. It is perhaps not surprising in this context to find him sympathizing and indeed contributing to the headlines above. He goes further, however, and in a series of newspaper articles and a tv programme entitled, *Has political correctness gone mad?* argues that fear of offending minorities has stifled legitimate debate and laid the ground for Brexit and the rise of populist leaders like Trump.

Phillips is by no means alone in identifying a backlash against political correctness as responsible for the rise of populism. Here is Stephen Fry: PC through 'prescribing language and forcing people to use uncomfortable and silly phrases...is a recruiting sergeant for the right'. For views which go underground fester, with people turning to politicians who dare to utter such views (Fry et al, 2018:23). This is also the view of Frank Field, the (ex) Labour MP who criticised the decision of two public schools not to accept a £1.million bequest to help poor white boys on the grounds that this entailed racial discrimination: 'It has exposed all the politically correct stuff you get in this area. These schools have learned nothing from Brexit' (Zindulka, 2020). Matthew Syed, a journalist agrees and argues that 'a climate of political correctness...has stifled free speech'. While 'political correctness started as a wonderful thing [with] most

people…delighted that the n-word and other hateful phrases have been removed from public discourse', it has gone too far and entailed the 'suppression of open dialogue'. This has in turn fanned a sense of grievance and led to increasing polarisation (Syed, 2020).

The overall argument of *Has political correctness gone mad?* is quite clear. Political correctness is pervasive and, by stifling debate, has inadvertently led to the rise of the far right. Phillips seeks to substantiate this argument by recounting examples and through interviewing individuals and small groups. Let us take each of these in turn.

Censorship on the BBC of politicians like Marine Le Penn, a French far right politician and the refusal by the police to allow Pegida, an anti-Islamic organisation to demonstrate in the city centre does not in Phillips's view protect the vulnerable but fuels extremism. A series of vox pops illustrate how people feel they can't comfortably say things important to them for fear of being accused of being racist or homophobic. Ordinary people's views don't count and resentment builds up. An interview with Nigel Farage, a right-wing politician who played a key role in Britain leaving the European Union (Brexit), reinforces this view. Farage claims that there has been a taboo on talking about immigration since 1968 and that people expressing sceptical views on gay marriage are routinely abused. Phillips concurs: 'Hypersensitivity about offending minorities has…stopped us having a grown-up debate about migration (Phillips, 2017b). And online abuse has proliferated, with Caroline Criado-Perez, a feminist who successfully campaigned for Jane Austin to replace Charles Darwin on the £10 bank note, receiving such threatening abuse that (a few of) the perpetrators were prosecuted. While the latter defended themselves in terms of their right to free speech, Phillips acknowledges that there should be some limits to freedom of expression to protect other people's right to free speech. Nonetheless, we need it is argued to loosen the limits on what can be legitimately expressed and debate different views. There is an important distinction between words and actions. Legislation prohibiting what people say as opposed to what they do is not helpful, and we need to live with the fact that we will sometimes be offended. While a focus group in Manchester acknowledged that words which exemplify disparaging references to people's identity (based on gender, sexual orientation, religion and especially race) should be avoided, there was little appetite for proscribing language except in the case of race and religion and even here, Phillips argues, it is not possible to ban specific words since their use is context dependent. Despite this, some young people, Phillips argues, 'avoid open debate' and seek to ban certain words and images and thus engage in 'virtue signalling' (Phillips, 2017a).

For Trevor Phillips, universities are 'leading the charge' in banning things in case they cause offence. 'Hardly a day goes by on campuses without a demand for a statue to be removed or for safe spaces where sensitive students can be sheltered from robust views in a cultural debate or sexual violence in a classic literary text' (Phillips, 2017b). To understand what is going on with safe space policies, Phillips invited 7 students to decide whether wearing particular clothing was 'safe' or 'unsafe': cross dressing for fun and Pocahontas costumes were deemed unsafe while Mexican restaurants distributing sombreros were seen as straddling the line. The National Union of Students (NUS) 'no platform' policy, which ironically Phillips helped create and has the support of two thirds of students, is even more threatening than safe space policies to free speech. The initial adoption of the policy of 'no platform for racists' in 1973 by the NUS had a clear rationale: 'to keep campuses clear of speakers who wanted to throw people of colour out of Britain…but over time the "no platform" policy [has] degenerated into an excuse for

political bullies to shut down debate and to impose bans on people who [a]re clearly not racists' (Phillips, 2017a). The campaign, defended on the programme by the trans-campaigner, Paris Lees, to prevent the feminist, Germaine Greer from giving a lecture at Cardiff University because of her comments on transgender people is a case in point, though it should be pointed out that the campaign was not successful and Greer gave her lecture. For Phillips, this campaign is indicative of a cancel culture which can entail in extreme cases people losing their jobs, as in the case of Sir Tom Hunt who was forced to resign his position at UCL after a twitter storm occasioned by a poor joke he made at a conference about 'the trouble with girls in science'.

There are two broad reasons, Phillips concludes, why political correctness has indeed gone mad. The first revolves around confusing symbols with substance: 'I get it that [there's a need to] protect women, ethnic minorities, LGBT people from hurtful abuse. But no-platforming Germaine Greer won't help the boy who really feels he wants to be a girl; sacking a distinguished scientist won't get more women into engineering degrees; and an employer *not* calling me "nigger" to my face won't stop my job application hitting the waste basket'. The second relates to the avoidance of open debate on a whole range of issues: 'The strategy of defending diversity by stifling debate has backfired spectacularly…The outcome? Brexit. President Donald Trump. And, though I fervently hope not, possibly President Marine Le Pen' (Phillips 2017a)

HOW PERVASIVE IS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS?

Phillips tends to rely on anecdotes, case studies and interviews with a small number of people to substantiate his case. The question arises as to whether these bear too much weight, and a few isolated incidents are conflated into a misleading overall narrative. Let us first examine the evidence that free speech is under threat and students are increasingly censorious before focusing on the claim that PC has fueled a populist backlash.

Phillips at times makes a hard and fast distinction between words and actions, but this ignores the fact that language can shape behaviour and that hateful speech can generate hateful actions. Earlier in his career, Phillips played a key role in the development of legislation in 2006 to prevent incitement to racial and religious hatred, and he still acknowledges the need for such measures. Indeed, he is adamant when discussing the case of Criado-Perez that prosecuting individuals for online abuse that entails violent threats or incites hatred is justifiable. Freedom of speech, ceteris paribus, should not be curtailed but it is necessary sometimes to limit freedom of expression so that it is enjoyed by all people. While the right to free speech is an important principle, we are often faced with dilemmas when principles collide. Take the two cases mentioned at the beginning of the programme: the curtailment of the right to protest of an anti-Islamic organization and the decision of a national broadcaster not to provide a platform for the leader of an erstwhile fascist party. Leaving aside the fact that the organizer of the Pegida demonstration chose the location agreed with the police, and the fact that the BBC has in fact interviewed Marine Le Pen, what these cases illustrate are competing principles in play. Unless one believes in absolute free speech, it is perfectly reasonable to disagree as to where the balance should be struck between say the right to express ideas and other principles relating to social order and living without the threat of violence. Sometimes it is legitimate to curtail freedom of speech. Many of the people interviewed claimed that this has gone too far and complained that they couldn't comfortably say things but to believe, as the uncritical use of vox pops suggests, that people really are being silenced and that white middle class men are no more able to say what they think than members of minority groups beggars belief. Take Farage,

for example. His contention that immigration has been a taboo topic since 1968 was not challenged by Phillips but is (to put it mildly) highly debatable. An anti-immigration (along with an anti-EU) discourse has been a staple diet of much of the tabloid press for most of the post-war period and measures to control immigration, coupled more recently with targets to cut net migration, have been common. 'This sense that immigration was never discussed was successfully mainstreamed even though vilification of immigrants in political discourse and their persecution in the legislation of the country was commonplace' (Malik, 2019: 68).

Let us now turn to Trevor Phillips's views on students. His characterisation of them as snowflakes incapable of tolerating dissenting opinions is a caricature and manifests little recognition of the legitimacy of the demand by some students for safe spaces/no platforming or more widely the movement for decolonising the curriculum. Instead there is a tendency to lampoon the students and rely upon unrepresentative anecdotes. The latter don't stand up to scrutiny. Safe space policies and no platform policies do not indicate the abandonment of liberal principles or the avoidance of debate. 'Safe spaces prevent people from speaking about a topic in a particular setting, but they do not prevent people from having these conversations in other places, and they only exclude people in order to better enable vulnerable groups to speak freely' (Riley 2021: 10). As for no platforming, it should be noted that 'the fundamental act of not inviting a speaker is not itself an assault on free speech' (Riley 2021: 11; see also Baer, 2019). Only six organisations known to hold racist or fascist views are currently proscribed: 'three of these groups promote Islamic extremism, while the other three promote far right English nationalism and fascism'. What is more, 'no platforming has been used very sparingly: 'there were only twelve institutions that banned controversial speakers or events in the 2014-17 period, according to the free speech absolutists, Spiked Online' (Santivanez in Riley 2021: 213-4) and 'ChangeSU found in the last 12 months not a single speaker had been banned from speaking at a students' union' (Bouattia, 2017). While we may agree with Phillips that the focus of attention of students is not always on the substance as opposed to the symbols of social injustice, his overall picture of students is a gross caricature.

This is not to say that Phillips hasn't some interesting things to say. He is in my view right to point out that, while we should treat each other sensitively and be polite, policies outlawing the use of particular words can't work (Ackroyd & Pilkington, 2007) and that we are bound sometimes to offend and be offended. His overall argument, however, that free speech is under threat and students shut down debate, is not substantiated.

A CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLITICAL CORRECTNESS?

We should note that the attack on PC is often part of a sustained campaign waged by conservatives and integral to the culture wars they believe play well with many people (Beckett, 2020). Donald Trump is a proficient exponent, presenting himself as a crusader against PC and frequently identifying PC as a pervasive phenomenon to be eschewed and replaced with commonsense: 'They [the political establishment] have put political correctness above commonsense, above your safety, above all else. I refuse to be politically correct'. And when challenged about his treatment of women, he retorted, 'I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. I've been challenged by so many people. I don't frankly have time for political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either' (Trump quoted in Weigel, 2016). The campaign against PC in the US has often been well funded and has included as part of its armoury, as we have seen, many academic critiques. Unlike earlier

conservative critics such as Bloom (1987), the populist call, however, is no longer to educate the elites (who are now seen as irredeemably liberal) but to replace them. Trump was unsuccessful in winning a second term, but the campaign against PC continues, with conservatives eager to find a more competent leader to replace him:

> *No national candidate has ever calumniated political correctness with such contempt, and yet no president has ever permitted political correctness to tighten its hold so much on the lives of citizens. The intimidation of common people as sexists and racists grew under Trump. After the #MeToo movement, mandatory anti-sexism workshops proliferated. After last summer's riots over the death of George Floyd, anti-racism slogans were painted over football fields…By the end of Trump's term his tweets were being censored, and so were the Facebook accounts of supporters who even mentioned the slogan "Stop the steal" (Caldwell, 2021)*

On this side of the Atlantic in the UK, academics have been quieter, but the right-wing press has waged a long campaign against PC (or its surrogates such as wokeness and cancel culture) which has provided fertile ground for Boris Johnson's brand of populism and helped contribute to the decision for Britain to leave the European Union (Brexit). Boris Johnson as both a right-wing journalist and politician has not been averse to speak disparagingly of people of colour, and in his tweet on the Duke of Edinburgh's retirement from royal duties extolled him in these terms: 'What a fantastic servant of the UK. One of the last bastions of political incorrectness. They don't make them like that any more' (Johnson quoted in Moore, 2017). What I wish to focus on here is his response as Prime Minister to Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement which initially was distinctly American and a response to police brutality towards Black people but grew in 2020 into a global movement after the killing of George Floyd, a Black man by White police officers was caught on camera. Floyd's murder prompted widespread demonstrations in solidarity with victims of racial injustice across the world, which entailed in the UK the removal of a statue of a slave trader in Bristol and reflection by a number of cultural institutions about their historical role in colonialism and slavery. Nigel Farage, a central figure in the Brexit campaign, like Trump, was highly critical from the start of a movement he castigated as a threat to the British way of life. He prodded Johnson: 'I'm afraid Boris Johnson and the government have gone along with this PC woke agenda' (Farage quoted in Zindelka, 2020). Provoked by Farage, Johnson used a Conservative conference speech to nail his mast to the wind: 'We are proud of this country's culture and history and traditions; they [Labour] literally want to pull statues down, to rewrite the history of our country, to edit our national CV to make it look more politically correct' (Johnson quoted in Beckett, 2020). This speech is part of a wider campaign waged by the right-wing press and increasingly by the government against PC. The 'war on woke' entails identifying different threats to our way of life and lampooning institutions for their virtue signalling capitulation to PC (Malik, 2020a; Hirsch, 2020). One example relates to the initial decision of the BBC to perform an orchestral rather than choral version of two patriotic songs at the Last night of the Proms:

> *Right-wing newspapers seized on the story…with the Sun running the story under the headline "Land of woke and glory". They saw the lack of singing as a surrender – not a practical decision that reflected the difficulties of putting on a prom during a pandemic. Cue the intervention of the prime minister: " I think it's time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and about our*

culture and we stopped this general fight of self-recrimination and wetness"
(Johnson quoted in Waterson & Bakare 2020).

In some cases, there have been veiled threats of funding cuts and proposed new laws. The Culture Secretary announced to museums and funding bodies: 'The government does not support the removal of statues or other similar objects…You should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics' (Dowden quoted in Hicks, 2020). The Communities Secretary has subsequently proposed new laws to protect 'statues, plaques, memorials or monuments…from being removed "at the hands of the flash mob, or by the decree of…town hall militants and woke worthies"' (Jenrick quoted in Hope, 2021). Meanwhile the Education Secretary summarily dismissed calls for changes to the history curriculum in schools to incorporate Britain's colonial past and involvement in slavery: 'We have an incredibly rich history, and we should be incredibly proud of our history because time and time again, this country has made a difference and changed things for the better, right around the world' (Williamson quoted in Duffy, 2020). At the same time he has introduced new legislation on free speech 'to counter what he called "unacceptable silencing and censoring" on campuses, despite the paucity of evidence of 'no platforming' and repeated reference to a key example of silencing and censoring when in fact 'the event went ahead' (Fazackerley, 2021).

But perhaps the most revealing intervention has come from the Minister for women and equalities in a speech where she set out a new approach to equality 'based on "Conservative values"…and 'pledged that equality will now be "about individual dignity and humanity, not quotas and targets, or equality of outcome"'. The UK had focused too much on 'fashionable' race, sexuality and gender issues:

> *We will not limit our fight for fairness to the nine protected characteristics laid out in the 2010 Equality Act, which includes sex, race and gender reassignment…the focus on protected characteristics has led to a narrowing of equality debate that overlooks socioeconomic status and geographic inequality. This means some issues – particularly those facing white working class children – are neglected (Truss quoted in Independent editorial 2020).*

In a year when we had become more aware of racial injustice and ethnic disparities in outcomes, the Minister seemed be 'play[ing] to the culture wars gallery and to be pitting the needs of minorities against those of the working class, when neither of them have been properly addressed' (Malik, 2020b). Challenged about this, 'Home Secretary Priti Patel [who described the Black Lives Matter protests as "dreadful"] backed Ms Truss's plans: "We're focusing on the people's priorities – we shouldn't be indulging in fashionable issues of political correctness"' (Bulman & Oppenheim, 2020).

In the US the attacks on PC have clearly been orchestrated. 'Most of the conservative books and articles…repeat the same stories, use the same terms and [are] largely funded by bodies known to have right-wing leanings' (Lea, 2009: 59). And, not surprisingly in a global world, something like that is evident now in the UK, with the recycling of the same themes, the same examples and indeed the same purported intellectual roots in postmodernism/cultural Marxism. The examples are typically 'exaggerated or fabricated in some way'. Famous examples in an earlier period include the story that 'local councils in London had banned black coffee and black bin liners on the grounds that they were racist' (Lea, 2009: 159) and the story that you could no

longer celebrate Christmas in Birmingham because the city council had replaced it with Winterval, a story the Daily Mail later acknowledged to be false in 2011. On examination 'almost all claims that "political correctness has gone mad" turn out to be based on hokum and hot air (O'Brien, 2018: 117; see Alibhai-Brown 2018 for further examples). This unfortunately does not mean that they are not believed even years after first being aired. The campaign 'by the conservative right in the US [has been] very successful' in creating a PC bogeyman and stigmatizing the Left (Lea, 2009: 261) and there is evidence that it is making significant headway in the UK (O'Hagan, 2020).

Irrespective of whether there has been an orchestrated campaign waged against political correctness, there is no doubt that PC, or rather anti-PC, has reemerged in the last decade as a major interpretive framework in the media uncritically reproduced by many journalists and taken up across the political spectrum.

HAS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS FUELED A BACKLASH AND GENERATED EXTREMISM?

Political correctness is clearly a concept with negative connotations and the focus of tabloid ire. While much of the anti-PC bile has come from the right, it is not their exclusive preserve, with many individuals, like Phillips, who see themselves as further to the left, sharing many of the same views. Rather than visualising political correctness as a pervasive phenomenon, I would suggest that an anti-PC discourse has become the dominant discourse (Foucault, 1980). It comprises a particular way of talking about and thinking about the world which in turn shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it. It does not merely reflect the world, but re-presents it. It constructs political correctness so that those subject to the discourse can see its pervasiveness and discover it all around them. Alibhai-Brown (2018) describes this discourse as an anti-PC orthodoxy and Hirsch (2019) as an anti-woke orthodoxy.

Contrary to the position of those who argue that PC fuelled a populist backlash, I wish to argue that the right has successfully used this anti-PC discourse to create a populist movement and mobilise disaffected voters. Drawing upon an anti-immigration discourse popularised by much of the tabloid press, along with an anti-PC discourse, the right has identified a range of bogeymen including immigrants, Muslims and the do-gooding elite. 'By 2016 in the US and UK, the myth of PC had so taken hold that the grievance boil it had been nourishing for years finally burst' with the vote to leave the European Union in the referendum (Brexit) and the advent of Donald Trump to the US presidency (Malik, 2019: 68). What is noteworthy here is the 'strong correlation between a perception of politically correct language orthodoxy and support for Trump' (Malik, 2019: 64) and 'direct correlation between antipathy towards the EU and perceptions of PC muzzling' (Malik, 2019: 70). The evidence of a massive split in perception, across the EU referendum divide' is remarkable: 'By 49 to 39 per cent, Remainers are convinced that people are free to say what they think, but Leavers believe – by a crushing 60 to 26 margin – that there are important things that Britain can't talk about' (Clark, 2019). Conjuring up a sense that we are victims of PC, the right has successfully helped encourage those who are anti PC feel 'that they are in fact courageous to go against this imaginary tide' (Malik, 2019: 89).

In the process conservatives draw upon a picture of Britain as 'an unreal land of distorted memories and colonial amnesia'. The Britain we are enjoined to believe in 'was simultaneously the biggest Empire on earth and the tiny underdog that stood alone in 1940 going on to defeat the Nazis with only bit part assistance from the US and USSR' (Olusoga, 2019) . Unlike Germany

which after 1968 began to come to terms with its Nazi past, we have yet to come to terms with our past and live in a fantasy world. Thus we quietly forget our role in the atrocities in the, Kenyan detention camps in the 1950s, but never stop going on about the fact that we won the war (Younge, 2019). A recent book argues that 'a dangerous imperialist conception of our standing in the world…was the catalyst for the process leading up to Brexit, especially for those arguing most fervently for Brexit'. In the context of growing inequality and poverty, and 'decades of innuendo and then outright propaganda suggesting that immigration was the main source of their woes', a small majority were persuaded to vote Brexit. Ignorant of Britain's imperial history and fuelled by a misplaced nostalgia that saw the Empire as a force for good, enough people were persuaded to 'take back control' and put the great back into Great Britain (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019: 3; 7). Contrary to the views of those who dismiss Cambridge inquiring into its links with slavery, it is arguably important that we cure ourselves of amnesia so that we become less susceptible to accept myths of the past.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Phillips and other critics who point to the pervasiveness and tyranny of political correctness, it is an anti-PC discourse that is dominant. This discourse has proved very persuasive and underpinned the success of the Brexiteers in the EU referendum and the advent of Trump to the American Presidency. This has given succour to those who wish to go back in time and conjure up an imaginary past (Take back control for the Brexiteers; Make American great again for the Trump supporters). Political correctness has not fueled a populist backlash. Rather, the repeated invocation of an anti-PC discourse has provided fertile ground for populism to take root and flourish.

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