



Julian Petley

The retreat of reason

An attempt to put political correctness right goes disastrously wrong. On PC bashing in the British press and how it has aided the rise of the British National Party.

Occasionally one encounters a book that reads like a totally satire-free version of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, or of Henry Root's *World of Knowledge*. A recent example is Anthony Browne's *The Retreat of Reason*, subtitled "Political correctness and the corruption of public debate in modern Britain" and published by the conservatively inclined think-tank Civitas. Dismissed by the *Independent* as "reactionary bilge", it's like being buttonholed by the pub bore, whose endless views on everything are asserted with supreme self-confidence but appear to have been shaped entirely by the tabloid press, whose every utterance is taken as gospel.

Like Britain's conservative newspapers, this is a book that will simply confirm certain readers' existing beliefs, but whose peevish, aggrieved tone and cavalier approach to adducing evidence for its arguments will almost certainly alienate the already unconverted after a few pages. The whole thing, not least the postscript to the second edition, boils down to a particularly shrill and unappetizing mish-mash of self-aggrandisement (I'm a stalwart lone voice of truth) and self-pity bordering on paranoia (but the horrid liberal conspiracy of the BBC, *Guardian*, *Observer*, and *Independent* won't listen). As such, the book's title is an extraordinarily unwise hostage to fortune, as is the reminder of Lord Macaulay's remark that "he does not seem to know what an argument is".

Its title notwithstanding, the book actually defies engagement on a rational basis. Browne himself is an admirer of the tabloids as "torch-bearers for truth by daring to write deeply uncomfortable things that others refuse to", and his method of argument is the same as theirs: set up a straw man, then knock it down with a few killer facts and a dose of "common sense" (in other words, received wisdom). The only problem is that, as usual, the straw man bears little or no relation to reality: "political correctness" is defined as "an ideology that classifies certain groups of people as victims in need of protection from criticism, and which makes believers feel that no dissent should be tolerated". But who actually holds such views? Certainly nobody whom I know within academia, the liberal media, or NGOs, institutions Browne takes to be particularly badly infected by PC.

Many of the "facts" turn out, on examination, to be no such thing. All too often, no sources are given for stories of alleged PC outrages, or sources are tendentious and unreliable (as in the case of the *Daily Express*, for example).

Where one knows something about the subject in question, elementary errors are obvious, making one instinctively distrust Browne's accounts of subjects about which one knows less. A good example of his way with the "facts" is his assertion that: "the canteen of the School of Oriental and Asian Studies upbraided one German student for asking for white coffee because it could be construed as racist: she was told to ask for coffee with milk". The first problem is that no such School exists, but presuming he means the School of Oriental and African Studies, there is no ban on anyone asking for white coffee there. It's possible that the remark was made by an ideologically over-zealous individual, or perhaps by someone gullible enough to believe the myths about such bans routinely peddled by the press. Alternatively, the incident might never have taken place at all. But the reader is simply not in a position to make a judgement on the matter, and this one concluded that all we have here is a piece of unsubstantiated tittle-tattle.

In similar vein, no council has ever banned black bin-bags as racist; this is another press-generated myth, as I demonstrate at some length in *Culture Wars: the Media and the British Left* (Edinburgh University Press 2005). When the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh was killed, *Index on Censorship* did not "automatically side with the comparatively powerless Islamic Dutch-Moroccan killer", nor is it "on the brink of turning from an organization that campaigns for freedom of speech to one that campaigns against it". This is simply pernicious nonsense. School curricula have not "re-written" history to portray Shakespeare and Florence Nightingale as homosexual, whatever the occasional individual school text may (or may not) contain. Multiculturalism does not require people "to give up feelings of tribalism and belonging and [...] to prefer 'the other' to the familiar", nor does it believe that those coming to this country should isolate themselves in "parallel societies". Quite apart from the fact that both these claims are false, they're also mutually contradictory. Again, it's demonstrably untrue that "there are virtually no pressure groups that promote politically incorrect views", still less that the ubiquitous Migrationwatch UK is "a lone group campaigning for less immigration" which is "almost totally blackballed by the BBC". Need I go on?

The Retreat of Reason would not be worth engaging with at all were it not for the fact that, with ludicrous fantasies about "banning Christmas" and stopping schoolchildren singing "Baa Baa Black Sheep" once again flooding conservative newspapers, the book "seems to tap into something approaching a zeitgeist", as the *Independent* noted. But before engaging with it on even a symptomatic level we need to remind ourselves of what is generally meant by "political correctness".

The widespread use of the term dates back to the beginnings of the 1990s in the US, although the struggle against PC both there and in the UK is but the latest stage in a long-running assault by conservative opinion on secular liberal values. Its roots are intimately tied up with the ending of the Cold War, as Valerie Scatamburlo points out in *Soldiers of Misfortune*:

Redirecting the wrath once reserved for commies and pinko compatriots, the New Right concocted a new adversary comprised of Left intellectuals and multicultural sympathizers, and embarked upon an ideological struggle to reclaim the last bastion allegedly controlled by radicals — the academy [...] Suddenly, those intellectuals who had begun to speak out against sedimented forms of racism, debilitating practices of patriarchy, and xenophobia were cast as anti-democratic and

anti-Western. Conservatives interpreted demands for inclusive curricula, canon revision, and pedagogical reform as signals that Western civilization itself was under siege by the "new" barbarians clamouring at the gates.

Right-wing triumphalism in the wake of the Iraq war also played a role here, for just as Mrs Thatcher turned on the miners and other trade unionists as the "enemy within" in the wake of the Falklands War, so, in the US, Operation Desert Storm gave way to Operation Campus Storm. Particularly significant here was the speech given by President Bush at the University of Michigan in May 1991, in which he claimed that:

[PC] replaces old prejudices with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits. What began as a cause for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship [...] In their own Orwellian way, crusades that demand correct behaviour crush diversity in the name of diversity.

This gave the nascent anti-PC campaign a tremendous boost, and in the ensuing years the notion of PC has enabled conservatives to unify into a single conspiracy their pet hates such as multiculturalism, affirmative action, speech codes, and gender and sexual politics. PC has become an extremely useful form of ideological shorthand, a loaded epithet frequently brought into play by today's guardians of the status quo to decry, as Scatamburlo argues, "any position that challenges the virtuosity of capitalism, the nobility of right-wing cultural values, or the notion that oppressive relations of racism and sexism are still pervasive in America". It has endowed conservatives with a master trope enabling them summarily to dismiss criticism, quell dissent, and stifle critical discourse, all the while presenting themselves as fighting a conspiracy to destroy freedom of speech. Thus are liberal ideas distorted and demonized, thus come into being oxymorons such as "liberal fascism" and "femi-Nazis", thus have conservatives attempted to project themselves as moderate and objective in relation to Left-wing lunatic extremists, and thus is censorship legitimized.

In the both the US and the UK, the campaign against PC has been greatly aided by the media. For example, on 24 December 1990, a *Newsweek* cover warned readers to "Watch What You Say" and splashed the words "Thought Police" across the middle of the cover in large block letters. But the anti-PC campaign was given its greatest boost in the US by the radio "shock-jocks" such as Rush Limbaugh and, more recently, by the openly partisan Fox News; however, its progress was somewhat hindered in the US press by many papers' insistence on fact-checking, which prevented some of the more ludicrous stories finding their way into print.

In the UK, the anti-PC campaign first took the form of a sustained attack on the alleged antics of "Loony Left" London councils in the second half of the 1980s, but in the following decade it came to focus on almost anything of which conservative opinion disapproved, especially any Labour policy it deemed overly liberal, the notion of human rights, and the activities of most NGOs, in particular of those which, in conservative circles, it appears to be absolutely obligatory to call the "race relations industry". But where the anti-PC forces in the US were hampered by a national press that was predominantly liberal in outlook, in the UK they were massively aided by an overwhelmingly conservative, indeed predominantly illiberal, one.

Unlike Anthony Browne, let's get our facts straight here. The dominant view emanating from Britain's press is profoundly conservative in terms of the social values it espouses and, in specifically party political terms, the *Mail*, *Telegraph*, and *Express* openly and consistently support the Conservatives, and the Murdoch papers are clearly waiting for the party they have traditionally backed to become more obviously electable before transferring their atavistic allegiances back to them. This leaves just the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*, and, on a good day, the *Mirror* as representing Britain's socially liberal newspapers, whose combined circulation in August 2006 was a mere 2 696 995 against the 8 836 853 of the conservative press.

This fact alone makes a complete nonsense of Browne's claims that "by the early twenty-first century, political correctness had completed its long march through the institutions of Britain" and that "the long march of PC through every nook and cranny of national life was helped by the fact that there is little competing ideology". The very fact that it is Britain's conservative press that has served as the main conduit for anti-PC stories in Britain (many of which are uncritically trotted out here) immediately gives the lie to these assertions, as does the openly and avowedly illiberal stance taken by that press on matters such as human rights, "Europe", immigration, the judiciary, crime, in fact all the major issues of the day. Indeed, it is the ferociously illiberal and stridently populist — which Browne characteristically confuses with popular — manner in which these issues are routinely framed by the conservative press that makes it so difficult to engage in sensible public debate, let alone legislate, on these matters.

Fascinatingly, Browne's strictures about the phantasm of PC can actually be applied entirely without alteration to the all-too-real phenomenon of the conservative press, as can his quote from Lenin to the effect that "a lie told often enough becomes the truth". For example: "counter arguments to politically correct beliefs are dismissed without consideration, or simply suppressed"; "people who transgress politically correct beliefs are seen not just as wrong, to be debated with, but evil, to be condemned, silenced, and spurned" (a particular speciality of the *Mail*); "the politically correct build impregnable castles around their beliefs, which means, like royalty, never having to justify and never having to apologize" (Paul Dacre to a T); "the stifling of public debate, the preference for emotional comfort over reason, and for political correctness over factual correctness, can often make it very difficult for policy makers to deal with growing problems" (most obviously "Europe").

Significantly, however, neither the media as a whole nor the conservative press in particular loom large in Browne's book (although there are a few sideswipes at the allegedly over-liberal BBC and the unholy trinity of the *Guardian/Observer/Independent*). But, of course, Browne is a journalist (Europe correspondent at *The Times*) and, as such, adheres to the increasingly threadbare and discredited ideology that the media are simply passive reflectors of the society on which they report, as opposed to key players in it, and in the political process in particular. As John Lloyd argues in *What the Media are Doing to Our Politics*: "the media have an unwritten rule not to divulge their power [...] They make and re-make the versions of the world with which we live — and yet when the news media represent the world, they largely excuse themselves from it".

Or as David Walker puts it in his contribution to the New Politics Network pamphlet *Invisible Political Actors*, journalists "rarely write about themselves

or their own political responsibilities, and they almost never write about the organizations and interests of the organizations they themselves write for". From the way in which most journalists write and speak about their work, one would never guess that they are employed by what are now some of the most powerful institutions in society. Furthermore, because they refuse to acknowledge their power, they also refuse to acknowledge the responsibility and accountability that go with power — while at the same time, of course, constantly insisting on their right, and indeed their duty, to scrutinize and hold to account all other power holders. Consequently, as Will Hutton put it in the *Observer*, 17 August 2003: "Britain's least accountable and self-critical institutions have become the media".

The basic dishonesty and untenability of this position is perfectly illustrated by the role played by anti-PC stories in the current rise of the BNP. It cannot but damage community relations if the majority white population is constantly regaled by the conservative press with stories that ethnic communities, or organizations acting in their interests, are demanding apparently absurd or excessive changes to traditional British ways of life. Most people are simply not in a position to understand that the vast majority of these stories are either inaccurate, wildly exaggerated, or indeed entirely fabricated, and when by dint of sheer, grinding repetition in the conservative press, some of these stories manage to bounce themselves onto the broadcast agenda as well (*Today* take particular note), it is perfectly understandable that they feel resentful. Indeed, as far as the press is concerned, this is the very purpose of such stories. In the run-up to the May elections, Tory MP Philip Davies accused mainstream politicians of failing to debate asylum and immigration sufficiently, thus making voters feel that their concerns on this issue were being ignored and so turning to the far right. He was quoted in the *Observer* of 23 April as saying: "People feel nobody is standing up and talking about [asylum and immigration] issues. The whole thing about political correctness is a key driver of that. They feel the only way they've got now to express their opinions is to put a cross in a secret ballot for the BNP. The fear is if you are white and you say something that may be considered derogatory by somebody about an ethnic minority, you are going to be sacked or locked up".

Now this may have been simply a ploy to try to get his party to become tougher on these issues, but it is nonetheless the case that the BNP has indeed played the PC card for all its worth. For example, its 2005 General Election manifesto argued that:

[O]ur dearly-bought birthright of freedom is under mortal threat once more. The political elite are nearing the end of a process which will outlaw any expression of opinions deemed to be politically incorrect and promised that all laws against traditional free speech rights will be repealed, starting with the vague, politicized, and hypocritically enforced laws pertaining to race and religion, which are virtually never enforced against foreigners attacking the racial and religious groups indigenous to Britain.

British conservative newspapers currently lamenting the rise of the BNP should seriously consider the role that the myths they have created about PC have played in this process. And Anthony Browne in particular should reflect on why he has such a fan in the US website V-Dare, an affiliate of the Center for American Unity, which is concerned with "whether the United States can survive as a nation-state, the political expression of a distinct American

people, in the face of these emerging threats: mass immigration, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and affirmative action"; why, closer to home, the BNP website is selling *The Retreat of Reason*, and why it is lauded there as a "powerful critique of political (sic) correct thinking", "long overdue", and an "excellent read". Curiously, this encomium is missing from the Amazon reviews page.

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