

Debate & Analysis

Rethinking political correctness



MARK SAID

Has political correctness gone too far, or do we just need a reminder about what 'being politically correct' actually means?

If you're used to spending time in Facebook comment threads, it's easy to be confused about whether being politically correct is a good thing or not. There are many individuals, regardless of their political stance, who are eager to passionately defend their positions.

'Political correctness' means avoiding language and actions that insult, exclude or harm people who are already experiencing disadvantage and discrimination.

Have you ever asked anyone about their 'partner', instead of using gendered terms like 'girlfriend/boyfriend' or 'husband/wife'? Have you ever asked someone what their cultural or ethnic background is, rather than asking them where they are from? This second option

implies that if they are not white, they're foreign and therefore not really Maltese.

When people complain about 'political correctness gone mad', it's usually because they associate being politically correct with being unable to act and behave as they please. More often than not, people who practice political correctness are accused of denying other people the right to free speech or of 'sucking the fun' out of everything.

In Malta, political correctness has its own particular dimensions. The more political correctness tries to correct social inequalities, the more inequalities it creates; the more it tries to put an end to conflicts, the more conflicts it generates; the more inclusive it claims to be, the more it excludes those who oppose it; and the more progressive it wants to be, the less progress it brings about.

Sugar consumption is a good analogy. Refined it might be, but we don't give much weight to the awareness of its potentially harmful effects on our health. At the same time, we are reluctant to make more use of products containing natural sugar.

Malta has come a long way in everything from civil liberties to integration, but our customary Maltese language is proving to be difficult to reconcile with what such liberties, inclusion and integration represent. For decades, Maltese have been used to utter certain common words and phrases that do not necessarily have any hatred, demeaning, discriminatory or insulting connotations.

Referring to a maid as 'seftura', to someone dark-skinned as 'iswed', to a carer as 'Filippina', to someone disabled as 'immarkat', to someone lacking good judgement as 'gahan', to someone mentally impaired as 'mignun' or 'tajjeb għall-manikomju', surely carries no malicious intentions.

Freedom of speech gives a person the right to say what they feel, albeit giving other people the right to point out if they are being offensive. Freedom of speech doesn't mean your words can't be criticised; it just means you can't be silenced.

These types of events occur daily in our supposedly politically correct culture, where unspoken canons of propriety govern behaviour in cross-cultural interactions, that is, interactions among people of different races, genders, religions and other potentially charged social identity groups.

We embrace the commitment to equity that underlies political correctness, and we applaud the shifts in norms wrought by that commitment. We are troubled, however, by the barriers that political correctness can pose to developing constructive, engaged relationships at work, in educational institutions, within our society at large, and even within the four walls of domestic confines.

The expression 'politically correct' has no universally accepted meaning. It is put into context by those who, rather than come up with substantive arguments, instead impose their own norms and codes of behaviour on others. It follows that if your analysis, reasons or arguments are misunderstood, then you are not politi-

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cally correct. If it is indeed understood, you are also politically incorrect if the other side does not agree with you or the argument does not fit into their way of thinking.

We have now reached a stage where no amount of reasoning or logic can ever penetrate the inherent flaws of this 'political correctness' culture. If one dares go against the current flow, one is immediately branded a racist, a xenophobe, a fascist, a misogynist and even a dangerous extremist.

In our culture, which is regulated by political correctness, people feel judged and fear being blamed. They worry about how others view them as representatives of their social identity groups. They feel inhibited and afraid to address even the most banal issues directly. People draw private conclusions; untested, their conclusions become immutable. Resentments build, rela-

tionships fray and performance suffers.

Accelerated legal and cultural changes over the past 20 years have ushered unprecedented challenges and confusion in contemporary Maltese mentalities.

Overt prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, historically sanctioned by society, are far less acceptable today. Laws now protect traditionally underrepresented groups from blatant discrimination in hiring and promotion, and political correctness has reset the standards for civility and respect in people's day-to-day interactions.

Despite this obvious progress, political correctness remains a double-edged sword.

Those to whom corrective actions are directed walk on eggshells for fear of unwittingly transgressing the rules of political correctness.

Speech codes have silenced anyone who won't toe the liberal line. Feminists, wielding their brand of sexual correctness, have taken over.

The phrase "political correctness" is on everyone's lips, on radio and television, and in newspapers and magazines. The phenomenon itself, however, is deceptively described. Political correctness today appears to be more of a myth than a reality.

Constructive engagement of differences and, therefore, effective leadership in culturally diverse contexts require majority and minority individuals to develop a mindset and skills that all parties currently lack.

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VALERIE VISANICH

Some days it feels like we're living permanently on the brink.

Newspaper feeds and Facebook scrolls are like an endless obituary wall. Overnight, accidents and tragedies rob lives without warning. The message is constant: life is fragile, live for the now. But instead of comfort, this constant reminder feeds a creeping anxiety.

Sixty years ago, in July 1965, Barry McGuire's *Eve of Destruction* warned of war's dark clouds. It captured the tensions of a world teetering under the weight of nuclear threat, racial strife, the Vietnam War, and generational unrest. What's striking is its reso-

Eve of destruction. Is it?

nance today. The specifics have shifted but the underlying feeling remains eerily familiar: a perception that the "eve" is always just ahead, and that destruction is no longer an abstract fear but a lived possibility.

As my friend and colleague Prof. Michael Briguglio noted in this newspaper recently, we're angrier and more impatient, especially on the roads. Gridlock, closures, and a surge in cars fuel road rage. Roads feel more like battlegrounds, patrolled by rebels without a cause on a highway to hell. The result? More accidents, more frustration.

Anxiety isn't just felt, it's sung about. "Anxiety, keep on tryin' me... can't shake it off of me," sings Doechii. Back in 2017, I wrote about youth anxiety, linking it to self-reliance and the pressures of contemporary life. Today, the story has shifted. It's not just that anxiety is rising but fear and tension have become constant, bringing with it increase bouts of mental distress especially amongst youth. Our social media feeds magnify the ugly,

often sensationalising it, creating what sociologists call a "risk society", or perhaps now, a riskier society.

The term "risk society" comes from German sociologist Ulrich Beck who wrote that modern life is increasingly organised around anticipating, managing, and distributing risks. In traditional societies, threats were often external and tangible: famine, disease, war. In today's world, risks are more global, complex, and often invisible until they strike.

What makes the risk society unique is not just the presence of risk, but its visibility and amplification. Media and social platforms turn localised misfortunes into global spectacles within minutes. Our feeds create what Beck called a culture of fear, where people perceive the world as more dangerous than statistical reality may support. We are not merely living in a risk society, we are thinking in one. In this environment, anxiety isn't just a by-product, it's a social force. People adjust behaviour based on per-

ceived threats by distrusting strangers and increased levels of individuality.

Another by-product of this risk feeling is the intensification of the mantra "live for the now". This mantra feels liberating in a world where tomorrow is never guaranteed. But sociologists warn that when the present becomes our only horizon, long-term thinking erodes. This pushes us toward short-term gratification, spending instead of saving, reacting instead of planning, consuming instead of conserving.

The danger is subtle but corrosive. A society fixated on the now struggles with commitments, to relationships, to communities, to future generations. Environmental issues and infrastructure suffer when we treat the future as someone else's problem. Politically, it fosters populism and quick fixes over sustained reform. Personally, it can lead to burnout, debt, and the hollow chase of constant novelty.

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And yet, not all is doom and gloom. I hope this holiday month offered readers a chance to exhale, to relax, unwind, and reclaim a little calm before the next wave of worry. Soon enough, September will loom, school gates will swing open, and the familiar hustle will return. Oh, how I loathed, as a child, that dread at the start of another school year. The uneasy knot in the stomach of uncertainties, as mid-September seemed to snatch away the last days of summer's freedom.