

PC or Non-Offensive

One year ago, a work colleague of mine challenged his director for referring to a black man as a “*spade*”. His director’s response was to call him “*one of the PC brigade*.” Very soon after, my colleague’s post was declared to be redundant.

As Ian Newton’s article last week displayed, the PC debate is confused, with many of those in the anti-PC brigade being racists and sexists who cling onto their supposed right to offend whoever they wish yet hide behind the law and go scurrying for compensation whenever their own interests are threatened.

In the past we used other words for being PC such as manners and respect, but there were still police chiefs who declared that police officers calling black people black bastards was acceptable.

50-plus year-old Ian with his furious tirade sounds rather like the guy in his fifties who’s told to clean the toilet after he’s used it, and protests at being asked to be domestically correct: “*Stop nagging! What you telling me that for! I never have cleaned up. That’s the way I was brought up.*” Such people don’t like the fact that society has moved on to offering manners and respect to sections of society discriminated against for centuries.

Many of those declaiming against so-called political correctness remind me of the woman I heard being interviewed on the radio who said it wasn’t right that you could no longer call your dog Nigger. When I was four, the neighbour had a big black dog and he called it Nigger, and when he bellowed: “Nigger” I was frightened, not for the dog but for me.

However, it is irritating that they are assisted by heavy-handed insensitive methods used by some organisations in the name of being PC. Take the recent celebrated case of the Malvern 3, where, following a complaint, West Mercia

Police raided a shop and confiscated three gollywogs sitting in the shop window, holding them in the station for two weeks. The anti-PC Brigade made much of this clumsy police action, though I'd rather believe that West Mercia Police were acting on a tip-off regarding illegal immigrants.

Many organisations have changed their rules to make them appear PC, but this is mainly to protect themselves against the law rather than in a determined effort to eliminate discriminatory behaviour. Management that seriously wishes to eliminate discrimination needs to fully explain and campaign regarding the reasons behind the changes. Otherwise staff will only be upset by edicts that they can't say "duck" or "lasses" or "me lover" or "handicapped".

Indeed, there should be a law against banning words. In this much I agree with Ian Newton. We do not need to restore the Inquisition to defeat discrimination, but we need a society that cares and tries to understand and welcome diversity.

We should get uptight about the use of words, not the words themselves. Take the word "Bastard", I was born one, but my illegitimate birth doesn't mean to say I am going to be a bastard to everyone I meet. Young white people rapping along to a tune may hear and repeat the word: "Nigga" but you don't hear them all going around using the term. Most realise when they are causing offence and know how to avoid doing so. A word in itself is not offensive, it depends on what it is being used to communicate. I personally find poverty to be offensive, especially my own, but banning the word will not do away with my condition.

There is a stupid element that now believes that particular words are banned e.g. gollywog – can't be said but bastard can. Yet I and many black people, and millions of white people had gollywog cuddly toys as kids. I collected the labels. I have never objected to either the toy or the word. I did object when I was called gollywog, just as much as when I was called nigger or wog or Black Sambo. In the 90s I was visiting a Preston council estate on business, and I was followed by

a group of six-year olds chanting: "Nigger, nigger!" Where did this gem of working class culture come from? The same place as when I heard those chants as a kid and coming from people much older than me.

My book, "*The Golly in the Cupboard*", is about my childhood experience of being mixed race and in the care system. One 'radical' Liverpool bookshop has it on their shelves, but they put a wrap around cover over it declaring; "*We apologise if anybody is offended by the title or cover of this book*". That made me laugh. Even the porn magazines don't appear in a brown paper bag in Britain anymore. It must have been the only book in Britain to have the privilege.

What made me laugh is that the bookshop managers, acting as so-called agents of political-correctness, found themselves causing offence to black people by using the wrap around.

Sadly, sections of the BBC said that they could not talk about the book because of its title, but when BBC Radio Merseyside had me presenting a programme based on the book, and called *Golly in the Cupboard*, it won the national Race in the Media Award from non other than the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE).

I was told by some that: "*You are not allowed to say that word.*" Well what if you are in the work's canteen and asked what toys you had as a kid? Can you tell your friends that you had a gollywog? Should you be worried? Frankly, any organisation that disciplined a worker for mentioning their gollywog in their list of childhood toys would not have a leg to stand on, and the PC scaremongers like Ian know it.

Ian writes that being PC is an attack on working class culture and humour. What about the working class monkey noises that followed black footballers for decades, and which still follow black footballers in most of Europe?

Who decides what is acceptable? Black footballers have increasingly demanded action against this aspect of working class culture – and well done to Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o for walking off the pitch and insisting the game be halted because of the torrents of racist abuse.

British Asians were so dismayed by the regular racism they confronted in park football that they set up and now have flourishing Asian leagues.

Clubs have only taken action when threatened by legal or financial retribution – that's why anti-racist laws are being passed in football and in society.

Sadly, Ian Newton (formerly Ian Achmed Debani) reflects the fears of some in the ethnic minorities that all these anti-racist actions and laws will upset the majority of the population. But there are hundreds of thousands of other ethnic minorities, women, disabled and gay people that still face discrimination daily in the name of "our culture". If Ian sadly wants to bring up the spectre of political correctness leading to the strife in Ireland and the Middle East, then he should be reminded that the ethnic strife in these areas was brought on by decades of failure to address racial and religious discrimination. The recent riots across France of black youths were born of discrimination and nothing to do with France being at all close to political correctness.

It is sad that Ian had to change his name to get a job. Especially in areas where only small ethnic minority communities exist, blacks and Asians have often felt the wish to whiten themselves up and avoid abuse and discrimination. I remember writing as a child in the very white Lancashire town of Southport: "*I hate you people of day's gone by; inferior now I feel. You've made me feel an outcast; to all that's white I kneel.*"

Twickenham's rugby fans are often portrayed on the television singing the rugby anthem *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, but I remember the second verse of this rugby

anthem being sung on the school coach as we returned home from games around the county. It included the words: "*I went over Jordan and what did I see? A bloody great nigger running after me!*"

I remember too when my eldest daughter came home from school, crying because the teachers had made her wear "Gollywog" knickers. In tears she said to her mother: "*I wish I was white like you.*"

I've come across many mixed-race young people in such areas who have insisted that they are white. That is their prerogative, but I am saddened that social pressures have forced people to deny their identity. Ian might wish to turn his children into insisting that they are White British but he will never take away their identity, nor is it wise to hide young people from the truth. However, what Ian's turmoil represents is that he is trying to accommodate himself to racism and appears to believe that everyone else should do the same.

I've spent my childhood in children's homes and much of my life in ghettos like St Paul's, Hackney, Stoke Newington, Hulme and Whalley Range. I also spent some years on the factory floor. I've had a good laugh, but I've also seen a young woman reduced to tears by a crescendo of wolf-whistling as she crossed the floor of the toolroom. Working class humour may be savage and have banter, yet it doesn't need to offend, and if someone is sensitive and has manners, an explanation from the offended and they will take the appropriate action.

I feel sorry for our senior citizens. Long ago they were taught that the polite word for black people was "coloured". Then came the Black Power movement and Black is Beautiful, and coloured re-emerged as an offensive term. Now the old say coloured and some people get upset, but if they are told that some people feel offended by the term one expects them to stop. When you were young do you remember being told not to stare as staring was rude? You didn't mean to be

rude by staring, but then you were taught, with a slap if necessary, to stop because it was offensive. That's all that is being asked of the grumpy old men.

So, it is not what you are allowed to say or not say, and if you think you will not cause personal offence say it. If they tell you otherwise, don't or accept the consequences.