

Political correctness beats callousness

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In modern society, political correctness has come to mean giving due consideration to the customs, ethnic habits, religious choices, and clothing and manners of the people who are different from ourselves. Usually political correctness is regarded as an obligation the majority culture owes towards people who are in minority groups and who need special help and special understanding to assure that the rights and habits of minorities are protected.

Our Canadian society now faces questions of political correctness that are fairly new to many of us. In the past twenty-five years Canadians have given consideration to issues of political correctness such as the following: Should males who are accustomed to wearing turbans be allowed to continue to do so when they are on duty as Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers? Should women who are accustomed to wearing face coverings be required to remove them when testifying in a court of law? Should marriages of couples who are of the same sexual orientation have equal legal status as traditional marriages? Should our police be required to follow exactly the same practices for stopping and questioning motorists for all ethnic groups and should the practice of “carding” be forbidden?

Some of the practices and issues above have already been more or less settled in our society as to which actions are politically correct and which are in the process of being determined. There are many more such issues yet to be dealt with. Most of the above are concerned with judicial matters, but there are also issues of political correctness that concern personal matters which can be dealt with at a social level. These concerns have to do with relationships with our friends, our neighbours, or people we work with daily.

Some have to do with racial or ethnic “put downs” of fellow workers or associates. Others concern denigrating terms which are made by males insulting females. Occasionally hurtful terms are directed at the elderly while some are

directed at those who may be either physically or mentally challenged. In these cases there is often a thin veneer of humour going along with the insult. The humour aspect gives the receiver the option of covering up their hurt feelings by pretending to laugh at oneself unless they choose to combat the politically incorrect action more directly. Often this latter approach is unsuccessful since it may look to others that the receiver lacks a sense of humour.

Some of the cruelest types of political incorrectness occur in school settings in the form of bullying those who are perceived to be different from other students. This can include being too fat or too thin, wearing clothes perceived to be out of fashion, being too unintelligent or on the other hand being too smart and thus “nerdy.”

In school age settings cyber bullying can be particularly damaging since the perpetrators may be unseen and unknown. This anonymity increases the harm done rather than lessening its effectiveness. In some cases bullying has resulted in severe trauma and occasionally even student suicides.

There are, however, those who argue that political correctness has gone too far. Some say that we are now expected to be too careful about what we say and how we say it. They argue that we live in a free and open society. Freedom of speech has advanced our society and our politics in Canada. It is further argued that Canadians should be able to express our views honestly and freely and that’s how society can be improved. When politicians have freedom to criticize each other in political debates or other forms of communication we may all benefit. Listeners too can benefit from open and honest communication and in our democratic society we are free to individually choose from the best ideas.

On the other hand, I think that political correctness has helped us to see that when we speak with respect for others this can help us to understand each other. It can help to broaden our view of how those who differ from us may have much to offer. Political correctness can actually help us and others to have more, not less, freedom of speech. On balance, I look on political correctness as a positive improvement over the callousness of political incorrectness.