

Political correctness kickstarted populism in the West

By Melanie Phillips, The Times, 22 February 2017

For several years now, Trevor Phillips has been on a political journey. Originally a fully paid-up member of the metropolitan liberal set, the former chairman of Britain's Equality and Human Rights Commission has been regularly denouncing some of the shibboleths to which he previously subscribed.

On Friday (AEDT) he will take this further. In a documentary on Channel 4, he will blame political correctness for the rise of populism throughout the West.

The reason nobody saw the people's revolt coming is that political correctness is too easily dismissed. At best it is viewed as a kind of idiocy that takes the avoidance of giving offence to absurd lengths; at worst, as the unpleasantly assertive politics of identity and group rights.

Phillips appears to understand that, far more damagingly, it has corroded the very basis of moral accountability. "It was a clear statement," he observes, "that some groups can play by their own rules."

Those PC rules derive from secular ideologies such as anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, feminism, multiculturalism, moral relativism and environmentalism. All these and more are based on the idea that the white, male-dominated, Judeo-Christian West is the embodiment of oppressive global power — the political source of original sin.

So white Western men or Christians can never be offended or hurt because they are themselves innately offensive and hurtful, while "powerless" women or minorities can only ever be their victims. In other words, such victim groups are given a free pass for their own questionable behaviour.

The reason these secular and utilitarian ideologies are unchallengeable is that, in a pattern going back to the French Revolution, they are held to represent not a point of view but virtue itself.

Therefore, anyone who opposes them must be bad. This creates a moral imperative to drive dissenters out of civilised society altogether. For daring to question multiculturalism, Phillips found himself accused of being a fellow-traveller of the far-right British National Party.

Reason has thus been supplanted by a secular inquisition, complete with an index of prohibited ideas. It is in effect a dictatorship of virtue, drawing upon the doctrine first promoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of forcing people to be free.

Of course it's not freedom at all but a form of moral extortion: extracting permission to behave badly or questionably under threat of character assassination and social opprobrium.

Phillips may not appreciate the comparison but my own experience echoes his journey. For nearly two decades I wrote for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, from which I was eventually driven out by the disgrace of my political heresies.

From the late 1980s, I followed where the evidence led me to challenge one politically correct doctrine after another. Lifestyle choice, I argued, was by and large a disaster for the children involved in such fractured families.

Multiculturalism would dissolve the glue that held society together. National identity, far from being xenophobic, was essential for democracy and the defence of liberal values.

I was appalled that women, ethnic minorities and the poor were being infantilised and even dehumanised by being treated not as grown-ups with responsibility for their own behaviour but as helpless victims of circumstance.

Racism was supposedly endemic in every institution. Social-work staff were reduced to tears when told their refusal to confess to racism was itself proof they were racist. Any curb on immigration was racist. To me this was absurd, oppressive and culturally suicidal.

The understanding that education involved a transmission of the culture was regarded as an attack on a child's autonomy. When I supported a retired head teacher who protested that teachers were no longer guiding children but abandoning them to ignorance and under-achievement, I was denounced as "ignorant, silly, intellectually vulgar, vicious, irresponsible, elitist, middle-class, fatuous, dangerous, intemperate, shallow, strident, reactionary, propagandist, simplistic, unbalanced, prejudiced, rabid, venomous and pathetic". All that over just one article.

Nor did it stop at name-calling. I found myself in a kind of internal exile. There was no more cosy camaraderie round the tea trolley or invitations to supper. I lost work and was blacklisted by every major publishing house.

As Phillips says, the social infrastructure of advancement, rewards and status depends entirely on having politically correct views. If not, social and professional ostracism follows.

People have finally had enough of this institutionalised attack on accountability, natural justice and freedom. It turns out that what I've been arguing for decades is supported by millions throughout the West.

Now those millions are being vilified in turn as neo-fascist, racist and too stupid even to know what they've voted for. Their uprising is being called populism.

I call it a return to decency and reason.