

Windows and Mirrors for All

PC -it's not just your laptop.

By Florence Sprague

All natural. Organic. Free range. Low fat. Low sugar. No artificial ingredients. New and improved. These terms and so many more lose their value when overused, and because there is no consistent definition of them. The consumer gets to give each her or his own definition and spin, depending on inclination and the marketer actively seeks terms that lead said consumer to make positive associations. A recent radio conversation about this problem by a group of foodies highlighted this conundrum.

Their conversation brought to mind other phrases in common usage which have lost, if they ever had, a commonly understood meaning, allowing them to become weaponized in conversation. Rather than elucidating a discussion, some phrases serve to confuse or distract the listener from the import of the underlying issue and even to denigrate ideas worthy of serious consideration.

One such phrase is "politically correct." I believe that once upon a time it was created to identify actions or statements which were done to toe the line to an accepted point of view in an environment that tended to stifle freedom of thought or difference of opinion. It implied a hypercorrectness of position resulting from a coercive environment where some ideas were not open to debate, and yet still not fully accepted. One early use of it that I recall connected it to overzealous and illiberal objections to conservative ideas expressed at a liberal liberal arts college. The stifling of divergent ideas in an academic environment should not be supported. We learn more by hearing and critically studying a wide variety of ideas.

Politically correct has morphed into a phrase that can be used anytime someone says or does something that favors a philosophy or belief that the one making the charge of political correctness disagrees with. It implies that the original speaker or actor could not truly believe in the idea, but is only doing something to look "correct." It also implies an underlying faultiness of the concept being supported and denigrates those who believe in it.

Boy, this is tough to write about, because there are multiple speakers, perspectives and ideas. Also, the misuse of this phrase is not limited to one side of the political spectrum, so bear with me and let me know what you think about the use of this term.

Too often I find that instead of being used to defend freedom of opinion and open debate, this expression is used to dismiss efforts to promote and sustain equity. It is used to put down things which I think are just correct, not politically correct. But those who are uncomfortable with the social change may charge the supporters of social change with being "politically correct," supporting a popular idea, which the challengers do not want supported.

For example, as we get farther from the heyday of the Women's Movement if one were to insist that females be called women rather than girls, there might be a charge of 'political correctness.' This is no longer considered a substantive distinction in many circles. While I agree that equal pay, the mommy track, sexual assault culture, and many other issues are more pressing, I still find careful and respectful use of language to be foundational to other changes.

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Some might think that giving women equal opportunity to apply for all jobs in the military to be “only” politically correct. Think back to when the eligibility standards for police and fire departments, and many other jobs were challenged. The goal was to make sure that the requirements were truly relevant to the job. Fitness and strength levels should be realistic and based on the actual equipment used, not arbitrarily set, or at times even intentionally set to exclude women. Now we have women meeting the requirements and serving in a much wider variety of positions. That can happen in the military, too. Men and women vary greatly within their gender in strength, risk taking, judgment, and so many traits. Whatever the job, we need to try to set eligibility requirements that are truly relevant. We already have both men and women in the military, and speaking as the parent of a son in the Army Reserve, our sons and daughters are all precious. Policy should seek to minimize military actions, not minimize who can serve.

I’m sure that you can think of other, and likely better, examples of “politically correct” being abused to dismiss important ideas. And this is why we need all be prepared to defend our positions with clarity and calmness and not let ideas be spun and diminished. Likewise we need to defend the right for all positions to be expressed and encourage all sides to state their differing points of view without derogation of the opposition.

Think things through and be prepared to express and defend your beliefs as correct, plain and simple.