


The dam is burst: Trump has legitimised the politically incorrect

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Protests took place in a number of cities across the world following the inauguration of Donald Trump as US President. [Laura Tedesco](#) writes that Trump's election undid many of the advances that had been achieved in promoting tolerance for minorities, and that responding to this new political climate will be far from straightforward – but that it is a moral imperative for progressive political movements to organise and react.



Since the 1980s, the concept of the politically correct has spread. Activists pushed for changes signalling that xenophobia, machismo and homophobia were socially unacceptable and should be politically condemned. New terms replaced disrespectful words and attitudes, which were increasingly ostracised. In the same way we learned that smoking kills, we were taught that to be different was not to be looked down upon, and that social inclusion enriched us all. The cost was to control our most primitive instincts: all this was a step away from the brutish state of nature.

This political correctness changed our social contract with communities that embraced an increasingly wide range of races, languages, religions, skills and sexual orientations. Globalisation has deepened diversity. Political correctness helped us accept this and to hide our most egotistical and exclusionary impulses. Nazism and apartheid stood as a reminder of what could happen if we failed to limit such urges. We adapted our language, employing new terms like Afro-American, Down's syndrome, and LGBT community. As diversity spread, so we had to adopt new terminology, a process which still continues: e.g. with recent terms like the 'burkini', which became the subject of so much [debate](#) last summer.

But not everyone has embraced political correctness. Some have grudgingly accepted and resigned themselves to it so as not to face social stigma, but have never internalised the new norms, even if they have adopted the new terminology. Timur Kuran, economics and political science professor at Duke University called this 'preference falsification'. In his 1995 book, *[Private Truths, Public Lies](#)*, he analysed the tendency for people to hide their true beliefs under social pressure. In order to be well mannered and agreeable many had to hide their true feelings.

Globalisation brought diversity home to the local neighbourhood. Many citizens began to feel their identities unravel. Terrorism has accentuated their fears. Does this explain the surprising election results we have seen recently? Do we no longer dare reveal who we voted for? And once someone laughs at the handicapped, disrespects women or insults migrants, many others may feel their politically incorrect feelings have become legitimised. Especially when that person becomes President of the United States.



Trump supporters at a Neo-Nazi rally. Credits: [Paul Weaver](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Those who feel constrained by political correctness are tired of not being able to express themselves in response to the changing identities of their cities. Many feel threatened and alone in societies that are more and more alien to their traditions. When Trump broke with political correctness in his campaign, imitating a handicapped person, insulting Mexicans, expressing distrust of Muslims, denigrating women, he legitimised the politically incorrect, the law of the strongest.

Now the damage is done. The dam is burst. Those who were pretending to be something they were not, are now vindicated. Those that had achieved respect and inclusion now feel fear. Progressives, the tolerant, those who appreciate diversity are obliged to react. There was much struggle, blood and many ideals that helped overcome our basest instincts. The challenge for the progressive left is to accept that it cannot remain horrified and paralysed. Rather it must determine how to protest, and to defend what has been achieved.

A mobilised civil society can help defend tolerance and respect. Political correctness was not merely intellectual posturing, but is a necessity in eclectic societies, enriched by difference and contrast. Our 'preference falsification' made us more inclusive. We learned to limit our prejudices. Now the challenge is to participate: in civic organisations that defend minority rights, homosexuals and those that are different. And to continue to espouse the value of tolerance, while showing intolerance toward racism, machismo and misogyny. The aim is not to reinvent a utopia, but to defend what has already been attained. To go out onto the street to protect an inclusive, liberal, tolerant and democratic social contract.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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