

Racist! What rows about language tell us about politics

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2012-1-8



The moment when Twitter made the political headlines

This should have been the week when we talked about serious issues like racism in Britain, economic policy and national political choices. But instead the new year has begun with three trivial stories about words. You can blame Twitter, but I think it might also be that the media (and the public) prefer the small stuff when the big things are so complex and apparently intractable.

But each of these mini-rows has revealed something different and interesting about language and politics.

The furore about Diane Abbott's 'racist' tweet generalising about white people who seek to 'divide and rule' is easily explained. She misunderstood the limits of micro-blogging and the way that an online conversation with one person may look very different to everyone else when taken out of context.

What was galling about it for me was hearing a lot of people who previously never cared about racial prejudice suddenly getting all 'upset' at her 'racism' to white people. On the other hand, I am delighted that 'political correctness'

has now won.

For years reactionaries used to moan about right-on liberals like me who tried to get people to use non-racist, non-sexist language. Now suddenly, offensive language is taboo, even in the heat of a football match. The police will persecute you if you use it in on the terraces or Twitter. The fact that our first black female MP has fallen foul of this new sensitivity is a small price to pay for the overall change in the social climate.

The fact that the Sun gave its front page over to coverage of Ed Miliband's 'blackbusters' typo on Twitter says more about Murdoch's tabloid (and the Times that had it as a page lead) than its importance as a political story. I suppose it reflects the Labour leader's hapless attempts to connect with the public but there must be better issues to tackle him on than his typing?

And finally, as Trevor MacDonald used to say as he introduced the skating duck story at the end of the ITN News, Cameron's Tourettes.

Again, this comes under the Gaffes section of the political reporter's handbook. These trivial incidents are supposed to be a way for us to judge someone's leadership skills and reveal their inner feelings. They are Freudian slips that betray the inner man. In this case, it shows us that he is a heartless posh leader, a glib public relations man who uses a catchy insult without thinking of the wider offence it might cause.

It's just that I am not sure that is what David Cameron really *is* like. I don't know him personally but I don't think he's any more out of touch than all of our current political leaders who have worked in the Westminster bubble their whole lives. His experience of raising a disabled child must mean he understands those issues as well as anyone. He actually strikes me as *more* sensitive than most politicians.

In the end all this trivia is about perception. Yes, you can blame journalists for covering this nonsense, or the public for reading it (check out the 'most-clicked' columns on the news websites – they are not dominated by macro economic analysis). But in the end it is up to politicians to raise their game. If they really want to talk about the big issues, we'll listen. But do they?

