Political correctness

Virginia Walsh

ALIA executive director

We can fool some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time...

The government has signalled that it is not business as usual in Canberra. Substantial cutbacks in departmental spending are underway with a number of programs already axed and staff reductions announced. These changes will impact on the delivery of library services in government departments and agencies including those of the National Library. No one is immune from the government direction to produce reductions in outlays and this is occurring through projected cuts in library acquisitions as well as human resources. At our meeting with the Arts Adviser to the Minister for Communications and the Arts on 6 May it became clear that we have to continue to stress the importance of the promised Coalition contribution of $11.4 million for online services to public libraries if it too is not to become a casualty of this pruning exercise.

Combined with highly-publicised cuts to spending on information technology throughout the bureaucracy, the reduction in library services will seriously impede the capacity of the public sector to access relevant and timely information. Concurrent with these developments are changes in public policy development which could see major shifts in copyright law. The impact on the free flow of information will be significant, particularly through possible changes to the existing fair dealing régime and developments in relation to the copyright status of information which is browsed online. These concerns were the subject of Sir Anthony Mason's Australian Library Week Oration on 1 May and have created some interesting feedback in the media. The text of the Oration has been widely distributed to politicians in government and opposition [an abridged version can be found at http://www.alia.org.au/alia/speeches/masonsp.html] and its is hoped that the substantial issues canvassed by Sir Anthony will open the debate and give library concerns additional clout.

While ALIA continues its advocacy role on the matters already mentioned, the subject of this issue of *inCite* — services to ethnic and indigenous Australians — provides an opportunity to explore another change which has been a feature of the new government's early days in office: the battle over political correctness.

Abraham Lincoln said that we can fool some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time. Is it too much to suggest that political correctness has become the art of fooling everyone? Some would argue that politicians have used the shield of political correctness to avoid the major responsibility of serving the interests of the most deserved in favour of the interests of those who have the greatest political clout. As ever, a case of the squeaking wheel gets the oil? Political correctness was one of the big issues to emerge in the recent federal election and is the subject of fierce debate across all media platforms.

You may recall that, in the run up to the 2 March election, Pauline Hanson, Liberal Party candidate for the seat of Oxley (Bill Hayden's old seat) was disendorsed for comments she made about services to Aboriginals. In spite of decisive action taken by the Liberal Party to distance itself from the perceived political incorrectness of her remarks, Hanson received an impressive and, compared with the already-huge swing towards the conservative alliance of the National and Liberal Parties, outstanding endorsement at the poll. Two other candidates, Bob Katter (National Party) and Graham Campbell (Independent, but formerly a member of the Australian Labor Party), also speaking out in terms tagged as racist, were rewarded with better-than-average swings in their favour.

While the new prime minister, John Howard, moved swiftly to distance himself from such comments during the campaign, he has since signalled that the debate on important issues will not be stymied by deference to politically-correct strictures. At a recent Business Council of Australia dinner, the prime minister said that he felt political correctness had gone too far. In announcing the inquiry into the operation of the Aboriginal Legal Service he said that the investigation would not be deflected by political correctness. To many people, political correctness represents a form of censorship. The prime minister wants all views on the table for debate.

The attempt to define political correctness can be a perplexing task. Commentators appear to have very different ideas of what it means. To some it represents a return to the repression of McCarthyism and serves to stifle free speech and to encourage the predominance of minority views. To others it is a form of politeness. Does it represent a fundamental shift in political and social thought or is it merely a pejorative term for the language of tolerance masking underlying prejudice, discrimination and other forms of social injustice?

Writing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 10 April, Affirmative Action director, Catherine Harris, recounted an event which she said embarrassed and saddened her. Walking into a city building, the door was held open by a man to whom she smiled and said 'Thanks'. A women behind her railed at the man: 'What do you think I am, some sort of useless wimp?' Harris asks 'What is happening? Is this why people think political correctness has gone too far?'. But is

this an issue of political correctness or one of simple politeness? Is it what we say or how we say it?

Given Ms Harris's observations we should not be surprised that the 'male door-opening ritual' rates a mention in *The official politically-correct dictionary and handbook* (Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf 1992). I quote:

> *A cynical symbol of patriarchal subjugation. In her essay 'Oppression', philosopher Marilyn Frye explains: 'the message is that women are incapable. The detachment of the acts from the concrete realities of what women need and do not need is a vehicle for the message that women's actual needs and interests are unimportant or irrelevant. Finally, these gestures imitate the behaviour of servants towards masters and thus mock women, who are in most respects the servants and caretakers of men. The message of the false helpfulness of male gallantry is female dependence, the invisibility or insignificance of women, and contempt for women.'*

Beard and Cerf clearly had a lot of fun in compiling their dictionary which was written to survive in the be-sensitive-or-else nineties. But there is a sinister underlying message that political correctness has gone too far and that it represents an obstacle to intelligent discussion. Rather than engendering a form of behaviour modification in the way we deal with sensitive issues it has resulted in the use of euphemism as a substitute for social change.

In his introduction to a recent Australian publication *Double take, Six incorrect essays*, editor Peter Coleman notes the pillorying of Geoffrey Blainey 'who had presumed to question the dogmas of multiculturalism' and philosopher David Stove 'who had dared to question affirmative action'. Coleman writes 'The political correctors could never have the field entirely to themselves in a country with democratic traditions. Inevitably there were voices from the Resistance, even if they were confined to magazines with a small circulation'. These voices are being heard in the 1990s. As Coleman puts it, 'the outbreak of freedom of thought was contagious'.

Marlene Goldsmith, member of the NSW Legislative Council, in her book *Political incorrectness* spells out the 'PC rules' based on an amalgam of George Orwell's *Nineteen eighty four* and *Animal farm*:

1. *Political incorrectness is not just a matter of what is said but who says it*
2. *Some cultures are more PC than others*
3. *All Australians are equal, but some are more equal than others*
4. *Ignorance is strength*
5. *Freedom is slavery*
6. *War is peace*

Goldsmith admits: 'the politician with even a modest number of watts in the light bulb soon learns that the secret of success in this business is to avoid doing most of the things that need doing, because many of the really challenging and controversial issues, the ones that need most careful analysis and debate, are off limits'. She holds the reign of political correctness as responsible for this failure and quotes Robert Hughes to support her argument for a return to a more rigorous expression of ideas: 'We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism' (*Culture of complaint*: The fraying of America, New York Time Warner 1994).

It would appear then that we should be prepared for broad policy debates that question much of what we have taken for granted. The merit of multicultural, indigenous and affirmative action programs will be debated in a robust fashion. In *Nineteen eighty four* George Orwell wrote: *'It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought ... should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.'* Is it too early to conclude that political correctness, the Orwellian 'Newspeak', is dead and all our 'heretical thoughts' will be voiced with passion? ■