

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: John Slavin@designfolk.com

PC – gone mad!

A SHORT note to people who don't have a lot of height: taller adults snag jobs of higher status and, on average, earn more than other people. Yes. It's true. Are you offended — you with the 26 inch inside leg? Well, don't be. This (not entirely helpful) fact comes to the world thanks to the Massachusetts-based National Bureau of Economic Research. If you're not a horizontally elevated sort of person, em, meaning "tall", then work a little harder to get in with the boss. Suck it up, shorty.

There's nothing like political incorrectness to get mind and body roiling, guilty as charged in these last few words — especially if you're a person who is sensitive to a perceived offence. I get "politically correct", I think. PC, as we generally say now.

Maybe like OMG, we have given an acronym to a phrase that is so commonly used that we've found it's just a lot easier to use a short-form. For most of us, PC is part of the world we live in. PC, that notion of carefulness in how words are used or how a person behaves, tip-toeing around commonspeak and doing what we can so as to not offend a particular group of people — or person.

To a real extent, I think, PC is a marker of an advanced society, or, maybe as importantly, a society that aspires to advance. Where's the good that comes from offending people?

Still, what has always bothered me about the idea of PC is when facts get in the way of clearly stating a truth, or norm — you know, "Happy Holidays" for "Happy Christmas", chalkboard for blackboard and all the other examples that, sadly, quickly come to mind. Those especially prone to PC so often do not take into account the ability of most people to not easily fall to knicker knots at the drop of a noun or verb.

PC can see the stark truth of a statement adjusted and "repositioned" to the point of muddy laughable irony. Like the story of the UK recruiter, stunned when her job advert for reliable and hard-working applicants was rejected by the job centre. As it turned out, an advert worded in such a way was seen to be potentially offensive to unreliable and lazy people. Really.

The PC among us are a powerful force — occasionally for the betterment of us all. They have changed our language, especially in the naming of jobs and people, the stewardess,

the policeman, the blind, the crippled — all words lost to the mists of a good-intentioned and evolving society.

Still, attempts by the earnest PC person at repositioning or softening a truth reminds me that truth is usually at the core of what makes us laugh. Humour is a rubber sword, said writer Mary Hirsch, it allows you to make a point without drawing blood. Sigmund Freud suggested that jokes were true and served two purposes: aggression or to expose unconscious desires (our Freud, always with the sex). American comedian Ellen DeGeneres agrees with Freud — and wouldn't he be pleased — saying, "most comedy is based on getting a laugh at somebody else's expense". She said, at the same time, that she found most comedy a form of bullying and so avoided the kind of comedy that hurt somebody's feelings. And so we have in DeGeneres at least one PC comedian.

The bagpipe is no stranger to the joke or "funny" line. Usually found in one-line groaners, the pipe has been easy fodder for the lazy comedian (with no offence intended to the lazy comedian, the energy-challenged). In almost every example I could find, the bagpipe was bullied. Well, maybe not so much the bagpipe, but the person playing the bagpipe, the piper.

Bagpipe jokes seem to fall into three main categories: the loud, the unmusical-sounding and the stupid player of the bagpipe. There's no doubt bagpipe jokes would never be said by the likes of Ellen DeGeneres: again, they mostly bully. Though in this case, I know we pipers are up to it. Like water off a duck's back — and no offence to greasy ducks — bagpipe "funnies" are sometimes just that: funny. Or funny-ish with some acknowledged truth.

Consider a couple from the assortment under the "loud bagpipe" category: "What's the range of a bagpipe? Twenty metres if you have a good arm." Now that's a line from a real hater. Or, this offering, "How is playing a bagpipe like throwing a javelin blindfolded? You don't have to be very good to get people's attention." Well, let's face it. The Great Highland Bagpipe is loud. The pipe is not meek and mild like, maybe, its Northumbrian cousin (and to our cousin, note "meek and mild" refers to "polite tempered volume"). And our range? It is pretty limited with our chanter offering one octave plus one note. In comparison, the jokester's suggestion of a "range" of "twenty metres" is fairly flattering.

There's no doubt that a lot of people don't get the bagpipe. To them, the music made all sounds the same. To bagpipe unenthusiasts, our music seemingly makes no sense. My favourite of those many that fall in the "unmusical-sounding bagpipe" group of jokes is that from science fiction writer (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), Jack Finney: "When you've heard one bagpipe tune, you've heard them both." Now I like that. A witty face-slapper. Finney's put-down is a cut above this jibe at what some people see as at the root of our sonic nastiness: "Why are bagpipers' fingers like lightning? They rarely strike the same spot twice." Bagpipe music is nothing without technique and that means mitts moving. So points, well, maybe one, to the joke writer for having some idea of how the instrument works.

In the sphere of bagpipe jokery, it's those that are the least PC that seem to be the most common, those that strike out and take aim at the person — the piper — and not a thing: the bagpipe or its music. To the PC, these jokes bully. To the piper, the sayer of this line makes it personal: "How do you put a twinkle in a piper's eye? Shine a light in his ear." What about "her" eye? Come on. Bullying sexism, I say. Or, from the pen of the same person — or more likely, jumbo-sized crayon: "What do you call a piper with half a brain? Gifted." A seriously low wit-factor from that zinger, much like, "What do bagpipers use for birth control? Their personalities." Note, when I first came across this line "their" was spelled "there". Enough said, except there's nothing like getting in snob mode to shut down a joke.

Of all the "stupid piper" funnies that I came across, there is one that has a bit of humour to it, like the real thing, some cleverness, a play on words: "What's the difference between a piper and a Rolling Stone? A Rolling Stone says, 'Hey you, get off of my cloud!', while a piper says, 'Hey MacLeod, get off of my ewe!'" But, oh, there's not much PC in those lines, the Scot, the piper, the noble shepherd and even innocent sheep and, as I write this it dawns on me, even the Clan MacLeod, are all tagged for laugh. Still, when I first heard that funny, I laughed. Not out loud, but a little, inside. What am I like? I do try for good manners and not to offend. But I am not so PC that I can't laugh at myself or others of my kind: dull, intellectually deficient — the noble stupid piper. ●