LOCALIS policy platform

How can the language used by central and local government be redefined to make it more accessible?

INTRODUCTION

Merrick Cockell, Chairman, Localis

At the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, in a discussion about language and meaning, the March Hare emphatically tells Alice: "Then you should say what you mean."

Unfortunately, Alice's repeated difficulties in making herself understood to the marvellous characters of Wonderland are no longer merely a fond memory of childhood; as our contributors explain, the language of government has become twisted and inaccessible, undermining our democracy – and, they argue, we must reclaim and redefine it.

Why does language matter? Language not only enables us to communicate with one another; it helps us to shape our very ideas and thoughts about the world and our place in it. Famously, America and Britain have been described as "two nations separated by a common language" but the gulf between officialdom and the public is wider still.

"The language of government has become twisted and inaccessible"

Read almost any document produced by central or local government and that gulf becomes all too apparent: normal words appear strangely stretched and contorted out of shape, a dense jungle of acronyms and jargon obscures the meaning of documents and decisions are routinely rendered incomprehensible except to high-priced lawyers and Zen master.

For bureaucrats, such "official-speak" is almost obligatory. How can a report matter if *anyone* and *everyone* can read it? Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes, Minister* would never allow such an unthinkable calamity befall his ministry or even the town hall – though I doubt he would ever have considered the latter had anything to do with government.

For most people, such "official speak" is a barrier to understanding how their money is spent and getting the services they need and deserve. Even worse, with good cause they believe it is created with that purpose in mind. We politicians become immune, thinking it is an occupational hazard and end up using it as an easy, lazy way of talking to each other.

So, we must take back our language and, in doing so, make democracy more accessible and accountable. Instead of wearing our Crystal Mark with pride on major documents we should write and speak simply and clearly. Isn't that what language is for?

CHRISTINA DYKES

Political Director, Leadership Centre for Local Government

People are cottoning on. There is a renewed interest in the use of language in politics. The fact that President Sarkozy has started to use the informal "tu" in his speeches was deemed to be so remarkable that there was not only a report about it in the Times but also an editorial.

The Local Government Association, keen that officers should write what Margaret Eaton, the LGA Chairman, calls "talk to people English", has produced a list of 200 words that all public sector bodies should avoid if they want their messages to be easily understood by residents. Both Sarkozy and the LGA have the same objective: they want their

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messages to be taken on board. One assumes President Sarkozy is aiming to portray himself by his informality, as a trendy, relaxed sort of guy – the sort that is not going to be fazed by the odd credit crunch or world banking crisis. The LGA wants to see greater confidence in councils so it is urging them to move away from an increasingly nonsensical and grammatically dubious gobbledygook talk. The underlining theme is the same: an acknowledgement that in politics it is not just what you say, but importantly how you say it.

"In politics it is not just what you say, but importantly how you say it"

My colleague Joe Simpson points out in his recently published study of "The Politics of Leadership" that there is a major difference between the utterings of a politician and the writings of officials. Quoting the philosopher John Nalandian, he writes 'the report (the written word) is the language of the public official, but the story (and indeed the spoken word) is the language of politics". The use of complex language not only confuses but also alienates which is an obvious problem. Avoiding incomprehensible words such as "predictors of beaconicity" or "coterminous stakeholder engagement" should be a start and refraining from the American habit of making nouns into verbs, such as in "incentivizing" or "bastardising", would be useful too.

Replacing strange concoctions with normal vocabulary is comparatively easy; politicians have the harder task. If it is an officials' job to instruct and to manage, it is the politician's role to inspire, excite and ultimately to persuade the electorate to vote for a vision based on political values. Forgetful of this role we are finding that politicians tend simply to follow a brief drawn up for them by their officials in increasingly absurd officer-speak. Hence we are hearing more and more expressions from politicians that are utterly meaningless in political terms.

Take for example the vision statement "Safe, Clean, Green." They may be excellent sentiments but can one tell such statement come from a Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat run administration?

Many Conservative councillors I know use the term "postcode lottery" without thought that for Conservatives variety is the stimulus for further innovation. Many dislike the word chair being used instead of chairman. By using the word chair, in the context of a meeting, a councillor associates himself or herself with a "we are all the same agenda" which is patently ridiculous for Conservatives who should have the confidence to recognise and appreciate difference. But yet it is an increasingly being used by Conservatives who are not thinking through the meaning they are conveying.

Every politician should take the time to read George Orwell's "Politics and The English Language". Orwell points out, even in 1946, that politics was being written in a language that sought to complicate rather than elucidate. Some of this, he claimed came from not understanding grammatical construction i.e. the difference between the passive, the active and the gerund, but others came from not understanding terms. He decries the coupling of unconnected words (quantitative easing or data sharing might be examples) and misplaced metaphors. He is particularly critical of ready-made phrases pasted onto unrelated prose. He concluded "This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, especially in any kind of political writing". What is needed, he concluded, is "to let the meaning chose the word, and not the other way round".

"Every politician should take the time to read George Orwell"

Politicians sound the same because increasingly the language of politics is simply one that ordinary people do not use. Phrases such as "direction of travel". How many of us say at the start of a journey "our

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direction of travel is to Brighton"? We would actually say, "we are travelling to Brighton", yet both politicians on the left and the right of the political spectrum would use such a phrase. Eric Pickles is fond of pointing out the ugliness of the expression "stakeholder". Not many use stakeholder as a normal means of conversation. More often we would say "those interested" or "those who are concerned." More serious is when the original meaning of a word is forgotten in place of a corrupted version. Take the word fascist. This is thrown around with complete disregard to the seriousness of the charge. Fascism was a nasty, totalitarian philosophy, yet the word is now used to denote someone who is only moderately right wing and who may hold libertarian views totally at odds with genuine fascism.

My own favourite is the use by politicians of the word "consensus". How many times have we heard politicians "seeking to build consensus"? But that is not strictly their job. Democracy thrives on didactic arguments. Politicians should lay out a vision according to the values of the political philosophy and allow us to decide whether we are going to agree – so we build the consensus.

By having their own language politicians are effectively saying "we know what we mean because we all use the same words; the fact that others do not understand is their problem". This is hardly the stuff that encourages the electorate to be inspired or even to trust those who aspire to lead. More likely the electorate is alienated by political language that seeks to obscure, conceal or, more worryingly, confuse political value.

Of course there are politicians who do write their own words and do think about what they say, Daniel Hannan being a prime example. A staggering one and half million people have viewed his three and half minute address to the Prime Minister in the European Parliament. Why? Because he said what he meant, the speech was pithy, the vocabulary was plain English, he used his own words, the metaphor was simple and sustained and there was no use of jargon. While it is true the novel way the speech relayed to the general public attracted attention it is also true his speech reads well because we understood what he said and applauded him for having the guts to say it as it is.

JAMES MORRIS

Chief Executive, Localis

Matthew Arnold, the Nineteenth Century Cultural critic, reflecting on the language of politics, in 1887 wrote: 'there is in practical politics a mass of insincerity, of phrase, fiction and claptrap, which can impose, one would think, on no plain reasonable man outside of politics'.

The language of local government has become dominated by confusing jargon. Words have been a key means by which this government has kept a tight grip on what local government can and can't do. This battle over words is more than one of semantics. During the last 11 years we have seen the emergence of a particular vocabulary from the Department of Communities and Local Government which drowns the whole of local government in complicated phrases and acronyms. Why has this happened? And how do we restore plain English back into local government?

"This battle over words is more than one of semantics"

The jargon ridden language of Whitehall - a language written for and by bureaucrats – has emerged as way of creating a contemporary version of what George Orwell, in his novel 1984, called Newspeak. Newspeak was a fictional language which

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Orwell invented and described as being 'the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year'. It is another aspect of the centralizing approach to language and governance which has characterized the approach of this administration. As one character in 1984 aptly puts it "It's a beautiful thing. The destruction of words".

One of the challenges that local government faces is that public perceptions of it are still overwhelmingly negative. It is a negativity fuelled by a media with an insatiable appetite for negative stories, such as '*Surveillance society undermines freedoms*', '*Council criticized for Chief Exec Pay*', '*Couch potato councilors can vote from home*' and '*Food 'police' to check on your diets at home*'.

The link between negative media perceptions and the language which dominates local government may seem tenuous but there is an important link. One of the reasons why the media is dominated by these types of headlines is because, often, the language with which local government communicates with its residents is characterized by this 'newspeak' language. In the world of twitter, blogs and social networking this is no longer good enough. The public want local politicians to speak in a language which they can understand, that reflects their fears, hopes and aspirations. They want a conversation with local politicians and local governments - not to be subject to an incomprehensible, one way monologue.

"In the world of twitter, blogs and social networking this is no longer good enough"

Here are some prime examples of where language has become full of worthless buzz words and phrases, such as 'worklessness', and what we could use instead:

Newspeak ⟶	A new language
Communities	Neighbourhood
Empowerment	Opportunity
Best practice	Excellence
Best value	Value for money
Worklessness	Unemployment

There is also an urgent need to rebuild trust in local and national politics. There continues to be a perception amongst the public that politicians are slippery, out of touch and unethical. Regardless of the extent of truth in these sentiments, by adopting a language which the public can trust and understand, we can start to restore faith in public institutions and figures at the local and national level. Words have a crucial role to play in building that confidence and trust. This new (or reclaimed language) can help define the future of local government as a means of giving local people greater control over their lives and pointing to a genuine shift from central to local means of achieving that control.

We need a language which sets local government free to be creative, innovative and imaginative and, above all, understood. Council leaders are beginning to reject the language being forced upon them from above, but there is still more that can be done. Despite the LGA banning 'stakeholder', amongst many other words, this can still be found over 350 times on their website. It is this example which perhaps reminds us of the importance of actions over words.

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CLLR DAVID LEE

Leader, Wokingham Borough Council

All government whether it be local or central has a duty to provide value for money and to inform their electorate of what they are getting for the taxes they pay. It is important that government officials remember that they are public servants and that members are there to represent their electorate.

In terms of local government, if councils do not explain in proper English then local residents will fail to understand its relevance to them or why indeed they should turn out and vote; they lose confidence and respect for their public servants and councillors.

Making language more accessible or understandable is not about banning words, nor is it about establishing a 'Word Police', but it is about ensuring your message gets across.

If your audience does not follow the debate then how can they be persuaded by your argument? Using proper English is also not about talking down in a patronising way to your audience but in a way that respects their intelligence and acceptance; if they cannot follow the debate they cannot give their backing.

How many times have we sat in a meeting and struggled to keep up with the acronyms and jargon? Acronyms and jargon are fine when used by a group of technicians but should not be used when your audience is not a group of your peers. Take for example an interesting talk being given to residents of a Borough on the implications of the latest CAA proposals. The poor resident, having struggled to understand that the abbreviation CAA means the Civil Aviation Authority and as a result missed some of the talk, then suddenly discovers that the talk was not about the Civil Aviation Authority, but the new and exciting Comprehensive Area Agreement. At this point the resident goes home or to the pub totally disillusioned with all council matters.

My interest in Plain English is based on wishing to get things done. As an elected member your job is to implement the policies which your residents voted for. To do this it is vital that communications to residents and council officers are crystal clear. Without clarity, policies cannot be implemented because no-one is quite sure what the policies are to start with. Although this principal applies to all walks of life, local and central government do suffer from the additional problem of being obsessed with inventing new words and acronyms.

So although I have no interest in banning words I equally have no time for reinventing words to replace those that are already clearly understood. Take for example the word 'worklessness' which has arrived with a bang, where did this come from, and was unemployed too difficult to understand? And its not just the reinventing of new words which is frustrating to everyone but the time taken by some inane committee to do so; have they no real work to do?

"Banning words is not generally a good idea"

Banning words is not generally a good idea; take for example our friends and defenders of all things good in Sheffield where Watercliffe Meadow Primary School banned the word "school" after governors decided that the traditional description sounded too "institutional". I can suggest an old English word for this kind of nonsense but I think it might not be acceptable in a Localis Policy Platform.

Although I am against banning words there are exceptions I would make to this general principal.

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These may include "Ideas Stores", usually known to us as "Libraries". Or "Predictors of Beaconicity", otherwise known as "A well performing authority". Or what about "Community Engagement", otherwise known as "Talking to your Residents". I would like to politely suggest to people who undertake Community Engagement that they could get better engagement by talking English to them, they might then get the input they seek.

As local or central government members or officials we must talk to our residents and each other as intelligent human beings. We should not talk down to people or give the impression that we somehow live on such a higher level that we have invented our own language. And, if you believe that people do or should understand all your jargon, abbreviations and acronyms try asking the members of your next audience. Take for example BESD, which means Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties, or PMLD, Profound and Multiple Social Learning Difficulties, to a meeting outside of education and social work; you will be amazed to find no-one knows what you are talking about. And if you want an indication of the dangers in using such language, think of inter agency communication in child protection; if all the different agencies talk like this, the answer is simple, you don't get inter agency communication.

"How many times have we sat in a meeting and struggled to keep up with the acronyms and jargon?"

Jargon may be fine when it is used by the people who work there but when it escapes to the outside world it can be bewildering. We all have a duty to ensure the people who pay our wages and allowances know what we are doing with their money.

PETER BOTTING

Speechwriter and Presentation & Public Speaking Coach

Before we even consider looking at words, jargon avoidance, sentence construction, rhetorical devices, and the clarity and impact of metaphors, we should first consider the agendas of those using the language.

In the way that a gun can protect or endanger, language can confuse or illuminate, inform or mislead, uplift or slander, depending on the skills and motives of the user.

We need to understand the motives of those using the language. Central and Local Government is split into Politicians and Civil Servants. There are two significant functions of language; to persuade or to inform. Politicians must persuade to survive.

Civil Servants should inform to comply with their job description. Civil Servants cross the line when they attempt to persuade those they are supposed to serve. Persuasive tactics, spin and PR do not belong in their tool box. Spin doctors and media wizards have no place in this function. For those whose function is to inform - clarity and accessibility should be the benchmarks. Opaque, cloudy, selective or incomplete information is either the sign of an absent skill or a malicious attempt to fend off criticism, conceal incompetence, and disguise a less than glorious story or worse. Orwell called it the defence of the indefensible.

Civil Servants should let the (complete, unvarnished, unspun) facts speak - and use accessible language that conveys these facts clearly - to everyone. To do this we should turn the Freedom of Information Act on its head. The default setting should be full

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disclosure, non-disclosure the exception. Local and central government should supply full, unedited information about their activities, plans, budgets, projects and partners (without waiting for Freedom of Information requests). This could be done via the internet as facts without interpretation or comment - along with Audit Commission ratings. This is possible. The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead have recently kept their promise to publish the details of all expenditure over £500. Not yet job done, but a huge step in the right direction.

"We should turn the Freedom of Information Act on its head"

This will have several consequences. Respect and credibility would return slowly to the civil service. Transparency would become normal and expected. The opacity advantage wielded by councilors or officers over taxpayers and voters would disappear. Real consultations could result and animated Swiss-style debate would, hopefully, follow. Electoral turnout might increase and cynicism and suspicion may start to decline. And this may even be cost-neutral at worst, as communications budgets throughout the land could be redeployed or cut.

On a micro level, two words should be examined and narrowly defined. The first is communications. MPs receive a Communications Allowance which has a strict definition as to its use. But is this definition strictly applied by local and central government and quangos? Or do their Communication budgets include both information and persuasion? If they do, they shouldn't! The TPA report on Communications budgets in quangos and local government highlights some substantial budgets hiding behind this doughy word. The second is investment. An investment must, by definition, have a quantifiable 'Return on Investment'. Otherwise it is something else and should be called something else.

In my job, I apply a few tests to what I write:

Is this exhaustively truthful or will my client be forced to make an embarrassing retraction?
Could the language complicate or confuse?
Is a clear purpose, agenda, outcome defined?
Is complex information broken into understandable chunks?
Is simple language used and jargon explained or avoided?
Are the sentences shorter than 15 words?
Have I used the active voice rather than the passive?
Does understanding rate higher than eloquence and clever words?

Accessibility is helped by simplicity. As Ernest Hemingway said 'You don't need big words for big ideas'. Orwell should have the last word. His checklist is unsurpassed:

Never use a metaphor, simile or any other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
Never use a long word where a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
Never use the passive where you can use the active
Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you think that you can use an everyday English equivalent
Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Localis is an independent think-tank, based in Westminster, dedicated to issues related to local government and localism. We aim to influence the debate on localism, providing innovative and fresh thinking on all areas which local government is concerned with.

For more information on our research, events and membership, please visit **www.localis.org.uk or call 0207 340 2660.**

To find out more about a contributor or their organisation, please go to their website.

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