

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

The 2008 Lexicon

A guide to contemporary Newspeak





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**Centre for Policy Studies
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PREFACE

“Political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.”

– George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”, 1946.

Politicians have always manipulated language, often motivated by the desire to create a sense of activity and purpose and thereby to justify their existence. And the language of bureaucracy has long provided a convenient disguise for government action, or inaction.

But New Labour has taken this disguise to new heights. In its desire to be seen to be solving every problem, and by the huge expansion of its public relations machinery,

this Government has – whether wilfully or unwittingly – blurred the line between words and actions. Talking about a problem has come to mean the same as doing something about it. Newspeak has blossomed as a result.

As this Lexicon demonstrates, euphemism, avoidance and vagueness have come to dominate Government announcements, ministers' speeches and every kind of government publication. This is more than a superficial problem of communication.

Familiar words have in many cases been drained of their original meaning. Others have come to mean their opposite. This corruption of language has infected all political parties, is endemic in public services, and is rapidly spreading into the media.

Contemporary Newspeak is a lethal blend of management-speak (strategic framework, benchmark, best practice), therapy-speak (holistic, empowerment, closure) and post-modernism (narrative, cultural shift, “truth”). The result, too often, is hollow obfuscation.

Apart from providing an illusion of success where little or nothing has been achieved, Newspeak can be a convenient refuge from difficult subjects. The word ‘migrant’, for example, no longer refers to a person leaving the country, or moving from place to place, but to a person coming to live here. Avoiding the word “immigrant” helps to obscure the political problems surrounding the influx of a large number of new residents. Children who no longer live with their families are officially (and clumsily) described as “looked-after children”, yet the evidence suggest that they are the least likely to be looked after properly. “Institutional” has become a pejorative term denoting unwitting prejudice (“institutional racism”) rather than a recognition of a set of established, generally positive, values. The use of disguise saps our ability to discuss subjects openly; it also sows confusion and impedes practical solutions. To quote from Orwell’s essay again:

“If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

Newspeak also makes people more apathetic about the possibility of better governance.

Becoming ever more cynical about the ability of politicians to mean what they say, the voter is inclined to treat all public utterances with contempt.

The purpose of this Lexicon is not to engender further scepticism, however, but to arouse a desire for plain speaking in politicians and to encourage its readers to think twice before adopting – and thereby accepting – Newspeak.

It is also intended, quite simply, to entertain, and to stimulate further contributions for future editions. Your comments and additions are warmly welcomed. Please write with any further ideas to the Centre for Policy Studies at 57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL or email lexicon@cps.org.uk

Jill Kirby
Director
December 2007

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A

Address (the real issue): avoid (the real issue).

Alarmist: what one must not be (cf complacent).

Ambitious: the setting of unachievable targets (qv). “What we need to do, both as a country and as the EU is set an example, in terms of setting out an ambitious target. This is because we need to show not just the US but also India and China in particular, that we are serious about climate change as a whole and therefore that's why we do support the setting out by the EU of ambitious targets, as long as the ambitious target takes into account the individual circumstances in each country.” Prime Minister’s Spokesman, DowningStreetSays.com, 2 March 2007.

Anti-social behaviour: anything of which the Government does not approve.

Aspiration: a pledge (qv) the speaker knows that he is not in a position to make (“To extend home ownership to another million people in the next five years and take the UK towards the Government’s aspiration of 75 per cent home ownership, Britain must... put in place long-term reforms...” Gordon Brown, *Government Response to Kate Barker’s Review of Housing Supply*, December 2005.

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Awareness (need to raise): announcement in place of action. “There is also a pressing need to raise awareness of the work that has already been done on redesigning care pathways so PCTs don’t reinvent the wheel.” Patricia Hewitt, speech to the NHS Alliance Spring Conference, 17 May 2007.

B

Bandwagon: something a political opponent is jumping on when he is closely in tune with public opinion.

Beacon: example. “We cannot be a beacon to the world unless the talents of all the people shine through.” Tony Blair, Speech to the Labour Party Conference, 30 September 1997.

Benchmark: used to suggest that measuring a problem is the same as doing something about it. Used interchangeably with target (qv). “A diversity of approach allows us to spread risks, to test out different ways of working, and to benchmark best practice.” David Miliband, *Perspectives on European Integration - A British View*, 2002.

Best practice: procedure determined by a committee of consultants; ignorance of precedent. See above.

Best value: expensive. “In 2003, we changed the guidance on best value, to enable local authorities

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to dispose of assets at a discount of up to £2 million, thus enabling some assets to be effectively gifted to the third sector.” David Miliband, Speech to the NCVO Annual Conference, 2006.

Blue skies thinking: uncosted ideas for further government activity.

Britishness: any combination of values which a politician wants to promote. Usually displaces long-standing institutions such as the monarchy, the Armed Forces, the great public institutions. “And these values are not merely abstract. They are embodied in our national institutions; not merely those to which Churchill assigned a ‘long continuity’ but to new ones that encapsulate what we like best about Britain – like the NHS; fairness and decency in institutional form. It is why under this government new institutions like Surestart Centres say something about what we value as a society.” Ruth Kelly and Liam Byrne, *A Common Place*, Fabian Society, June 2004.

Broaden: destroy. “We are looking to broaden the specialist roles of the library staff so that they can deliver the Government's agenda to modernise libraries, improve access to materials and make the library service more attractive to a wider audience.” Labour councillor, Bristol, February 2002.

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C

Care: regulated behaviour. “In summary this Act establishes a new, independent regulatory body for social care and private and voluntary healthcare services ("care services") in England to be known as the National Care Standards Commission...”
Care Standards Act 2000.

Celebrate (as in celebrate diversity): compulsory approbation. “London’s choice is clear. We celebrate diversity. We aim to give every community its fair stake in our city’s politics, prosperity and culture. We want every community fully represented in our police service, teaching profession, boardrooms and politics.” Ken Livingstone, “Multi-culturalism works for London”, 25 January 2006.

Celebrate (as in to celebrate achievements): to use taxpayers’ money to promote the Government. “There is much to celebrate about our schools – improving results, good teaching and committed staff... It is right to reward the staff whose work helps pupils to learn and these awards celebrate their achievements.” David Miliband, on announcement of awards of between £5,700 and £25,700 to 7,000 primary and secondary schools, 7 May 2003.

Channel management: closing call centres, forcing people to contact a government agency online. “Better channel management and greater

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use of web-delivered services may be councils' best response to CSR07 pressures", Society of Information Technology Managers Press Release, August 2007.

Citizenship: universal (qv) inculcation of government values. "The DfES has re-launched citizenship education with a sharper focus on participation in society, volunteering and community engagement." Ruth Kelly and Liam Byrne, *A Common Place*, Fabian Society, June 2004.

Closure: evade responsibility (qv move on, draw a line under).

Community group: a special interest group, or a group of people a politician wants to flatter or appease. Participation in community not relevant, thus does not apply to Royal British Legion, working men's clubs, Rotary clubs etc.

Community leader: a self-appointed or government-appointed leader of a community group.

Compact: partnership (qv). "Our proposals for a stronger and simpler 'Compact Plus' will cut red tape, level the playing field between the voluntary and community sector and public sector bodies, and further unlock the potential of voluntary and community groups for good." Charles Clarke, relaunching the Government's Compact with voluntary organisations, 22 March 2005.

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Complacent: what you must not be (cf alarmist).

Consensus: the Government's view. "Our shared task is to build a British progressive consensus." Gordon Brown, speech to Compass Conference, 30 October 2004.

Conservatism (forces of): anyone the speaker disagrees with.

Consultant: private sector worker paid large fees to disguise government failure.

Context (taken out of): inconvenient.

Controlled drinking: NHS treatment programmes for chronic and acute alcoholics.

Conversation (call for a public): a suggestion used to conceal the fact that a politician has no policy (qv debate).

Core: diverse. "The Common Core reflects a set of common values [qv] for practitioners that promote equality, respect diversity and challenge stereotypes, helping to improve the life chances of all children and young people and to provide more effective and integrated services." *Every Child Matters*, DfES, 2005.

Cost-benefit analysis (often rigorous): back-of-the-envelope calculation to prove original hypothesis. "We commissioned a cost-benefit

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analysis from Ove Arup before deciding to endorse the decision to bid to host the games in London in 2012.” Tessa Jowell, House of Commons”, 2 February 2004.

Crackdown (announcement of): not to be confused with the much rarer, crackdown, implementation of. “Gordon Brown promised to get more police on the streets and to crack down on illegal sales of alcohol to under-18s.” BBC News Online, 23 August 2007.

Cultural shift: something that the Government has failed to achieve: “At yesterday’s seminar, attended by Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, and James Purnell, the Culture Secretary, the Prime Minister called for a ‘cultural shift’ to combat under-age drinking and binge-drinking.” *Daily Telegraph*, 22 November 2007.

Customer: someone who has no choice over the public service he or she is obliged to use.

Czar: the well-paid head of a quango appointed to demonstrate activity in dealing with a problem (not to be confused with solving a problem).

D

Debate (call for a): used to imply that talking about a problem is the same as solving a problem (qv conversation). Interviewer: “Making it illegal to pay

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for sex – that is a huge undertaking. Is that seriously what you are thinking this Government could do?” Harriet Harman: “Well, I think we do need to have a debate about it... We have to have a very big debate about this...” Today Programme, 20 December 2007.

Deliver, delivery: the process of implementing policy (not the consequence of policy).

Demographics: overpopulation, overcrowding.

Dialogue (meaningful): the pretence of genuine two-way communication.

Direction of travel: the illusion of improvement. “The December 2004 consultation specifically proposed a more structured way for the Commission to report progress of improvement by adding a ‘direction of travel’ label to the overall CPA category.” *Local Government Consultation*, Audit Commission, June 2005.

Discredited (of a policy): another political party thought of it first.

Draw a line under (time to): to get away with, evade responsibility (qv closure).

Due diligence: used to suggest thoroughness where there is none.

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E

Elevation to the House of Lords: MP vacating his seat for a party apparatchik.

Empowerment: ensuring that citizens do what the Government wants. “To empower citizens the key is helping them in their daily lives through information and incentives, but also by making local, national and global institutions more accountable, transparent and responsive.” David Miliband, speech at the National School of Governance conference, 6 June 2006.

Engagement, engage with: appear to do something about the problem. “It’s about where you link in with local disabled people and making sure you engage with them on a meaningful basis.” Disability minister Anne McGuire, BBC News Online, 4 December 2006.

Equality: sameness. Absence of diversity.

Ethical (of foreign policy etc): unethical.

Europe, European Union: the former is a loose geographical term, the latter a centralising bureaucracy with the openly stated remit of ever closer union.

Excellence for all: all shall have prizes.

Exclusion: temporary suspension.

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F

Family: comes in all shapes and sizes. Equivalent to household.

Family (blended): step-family.

Fast track: not allowing Parliament sufficient time to consider the implications of new legislation.

Flagship: state schools that are meeting the minimum Ofsted requirements (qv beacon).

Framework (often strategic): incoherent set of ideas, a miscellany.

G

Golden age (hark back to a): excuse for why a policy has failed. "Some people will always hark back to a fictitious golden age usually to promote and enhance their own achievements. When this denigrates the hard work and efforts of the nation's children, it is pernicious and demotivating." Alan Johnson MP, launching a pre-emptive strike on critics of exam standards, Speech to the UK Youth Parliament, 24 July 2006.

Good local school/hospital: reason why ordinary people (qv) should not have any choice.

Guidance: government interference.

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H

Hard-working (families etc): undefined term of approval. Not to be confused with work-life balance (qv).

Honours system: a dishonourable system for repaying favours.

Holistic (nearly always of an approach): more bureaucratic.

I

Inclusive (as in big tent): exclusive.

Initiative: rehash.

Investment: current expenditure, and/or waste.

Issues: a set of problems that are not going away.

J

Joined-up government: excuse for cross-departmental initiatives which will centralise and increase government intrusion into everyday life.

Judgemental (to be): to be critical. To be avoided. "Known for her non-judgemental approach, Bernie is particularly beloved of her

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clients because she empowers [qv] them to find their own solutions with support.” *Tackling Drugs, Changing Lives Award Winners 2007*, Home Office, 2007.

K

Key Performance Indicators: arbitrary, unmeasurable, percentage measures based on benchmarks (qv), infinitely revisable and open to the most optimistic of interpretation.

Key worker: public sector worker.

L

Legacy (leave a lasting): the next Government will pick up the bill. “The Olympics will be legacy games.” Tessa Jowell announcing that the budget for the Olympics had almost trebled, House of Commons, 15 March 2007.

Lessons (to be learned): it is time to move on (qv).

Let me finish: I will continue talking so that you can not ask any more difficult questions.

Let’s be clear: let me obfuscate.

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Let's be absolutely clear: I have no evidence to support the following contention but will not be contradicted.

Level playing field: the assumption that it is better for everyone to be worse off than it is for some to be rewarded by their own or their parents' endeavours.

Levy: stealth tax, eg. the climate change levy is a tax on business use of energy.

Liberate talents: force people into work: "We will give people [i.e. benefit claimants] the help they need and empower [qv] them to liberate their own talents." Tony Blair on the launch of a Welfare Green Paper, 26 January 2006.

Localism: when people in a constituency agree with you (cf NIMBYism).

Looked after children (referring to children in state care): children who are not looked after.

M

Managed: any process which Government has given up trying to stop (immigration, hospital infection etc).

Mental health: mental illness.

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Message (sending out the right): misguided and unenforceable legislation.

Migrant: immigrant.

Modernisation: downgrading; needless destruction of independent institutions. Absence of specific policy.

Move on (time to): forget.

Multi-agency: no one's responsible.

N

Narrative: spin, an attempt to provide a common theme to a range of proposals where none exists. Unintentional admission that politics is now equivalent to fiction.

National interest: reason for withholding embarrassing information (cf Open Government).

NIMBYism: when people in a constituency do not agree with you (cf localism).

Not fit for purpose: description of any failing government department for which an incoming Secretary of State wishes to allocate all responsibility to the previous Secretary of State.

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O

Off message: independent, telling the truth.

Open Government: letting people see the bits of government of which the Government is not ashamed (cf national interest).

Ordinary people: you, the little people.

P

Partner (domestic): catch-all term for spouse, co-habitee, lover, girlfriend/boyfriend.

Partnership: a relationship in which the Government is dominant over the other partner. “Mr Brown kept saying ‘this is a partnership’, a reference to Labour activists and Government”. *Evening Standard*, 5 April 2006.

People: the Government. “The People’s Budget”; “The People’s Europe”; “The People’s Government”, “The People’s Honours”, “The People’s Lottery”, “The People’s Millennium”, “The People’s Money”, “The People’s Priorities” etc.

Person-centred planning: provider-centred planning, planning to suit convenience of social services rather than that of the individual person. “A person-centred approach will be essential to deliver real change in the lives of people with

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learning disabilities. Person-centred planning provides a single, multi-agency [qv] mechanism for achieving this. The Government will issue new guidance on person-centred planning, and provide resources [qv] for implementation through the Learning Disability Development Fund.” *Valuing People, A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*, Department of Health, 2001.

Personalisation (of public services): how the Government decides which services it will let you have. “This is the future for our public services. Accessible to all, personal to you.” Gordon Brown, speech to the Labour Party Conference, 24 September 2007.

Pledge: a numerical target symbolising (but not realising) a greater reform.

Postcode lottery: localism.

Progressive (eg progressive consensus, progressive alliance, progressive Conservatism): undefined term of approval (qv social, sustainable).

Public inquiry: an investigation which is set up in such a way as to avoid inquiry as far as possible; to kick into the long grass.

Public service agreement: arbitrary, centrally imposed and centrally monitored bureaucratic process encouraging the reproduction of quangos.

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Q

Quality: as an adjective, applied to barely-adequate or unsatisfactory state service, eg 'quality childcare'.

R

Radical (of reform): minor technical/organisational adjustment.

Real issue: the question that a politician wants to answer, as opposed to the question that was actually asked.

Redeployment of resources: cut in government spending.

Referendum: opportunity for people to express agreement with the Government.

Regulation (better): continued regulation; the opposite of deregulation.

Respect: ignore. "The Information Commissioner is developing guidelines against which information sharing proposals involving personal data might be assessed, and a framework Code of Practice which will help public sector organisations ensure that their sharing of personal information respects personal privacy." *Information-sharing vision statement*, DCA, September 2006.

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Risk (to manage): to keep records of correspondence with other public sector organisations so that you can evade responsibility if something goes wrong.

Road map: a plan, used to give the false appearance that a route is waiting to be discovered. “We now have in place a road map that will lead to better regulated remote gambling across the world.” Richard Caborn, *The Times*, 1 November 2006.

S

Silo (as in silo mentality): opposite of joined-up (qv), therefore bad. Originally meant a safe and therefore desirable place to keep things. “It is often the silo mentality of local as well as central government that acts as a major barrier to disabled people getting the holistic [qv] help that they need to lift themselves out of poverty or other difficulties.” Anne Begg, House of Commons, 4 May 2006.

Social (eg social investment; social entrepreneur; social capital, social responsibility): “If you put the word ‘social’ in front of any serious word, you reduce it almost to meaninglessness.” F E Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 1973.

Stakeholder: anyone with any interest in a public service apart from the people who have to use it.

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Step-change: more of the same. “Government signals a step-change on environmentally sustainable behaviour”. DEFRA press release, 12 June 2006.

Stigmatise: what must never be done (qv judgemental).

Strategic (of vision etc.): something which you have, but which your rivals do not.

Streamlined services: services which are more complicated for the patient/parent.

Sure Start: nationalisation of child-rearing.

Sustainable: all purpose adjective of approval (qv progressive, social).

T

Third sector: managerialism for charity.

Time of change (almost always unparalleled or unprecedented): all times are times of change.

Tipping point: unquantified threat of future calamity used to justify vast current investment (qv). “Your conference is titled ‘Environmental policy at tipping point’. That may turn out to be more true than you imagine.” David Miliband,

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Speech to the Environmental Industries
Commission, 8 November 2006.

Traffic calming: traffic enraging.

Trail-blazer: untested scheme usually involving
more government bureaucracy.

Transformation: no change.

Treatment (as of drugs): state provision of free
drugs.

Truth: that which cannot be disproved with the
available evidence.

U

Under consideration (the matter is under
consideration): we have lost the file.

Under urgent consideration (the matter is under
urgent consideration): we are trying to find the file
(originally from Yes Minister). Now applies to
computer discs.

Universal: compulsory.

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V

Values: what we have and the others lack.

Vision: useful to have when short of policies.

“What I want to do is show people the vision that we have for the future of this country in housing and health and education and I want the chance, in the next phase of my premiership, to develop and show people the policies that are going to make a huge difference and show the change in the country itself.” Gordon Brown, explaining why he was not going to call an election, Press Association, 6 October 2007.

W

War (on abstract nouns such as obesity, terror etc.): crackdown (qv).

Wide-ranging (as in wide-ranging review): term used to suggest that the government is solving the problem. “The loss of this data together with losses in previous incidents means that a wide-ranging review is necessary so that lessons could be learnt.” Prime Minister’s announcement on progress of Poynter Review, 17 December 2007.

Worklessness: unemployment.

Work-life balance: more time-off (qv hard working).

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Z

Zero tolerance (announcement of): how Ministers promise to respond to a problem (qv crackdown, announcement of). “Johnson to pledge ‘zero tolerance’ on MRSA”, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2007; “Smith announces zero tolerance crime crackdown”, *The Guardian*, 27 September 2007.



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– George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”, 1946.