

Plain Talk? Not When Ottawa Has Its Way *

There's an interesting new twist to Ottawa's official bilingualism policy. It involves the use of a second language to translate reality into fiction.

Language has become an incredibly powerful weapon in the government's latest war – the assault on social programs. Nagg-ing social problems are now being remedied by political 'spin doctors' who concoct new words and expressions to wish our woes away or to magically transform them from loathsome frogs into desirable princesses.

Take, for example, the problem of unemployment. The 1.4 million Canadians who are currently looking for work are no longer considered to be unemployed. They are in 'transition.' They are reorganizing their financial resources in order to regain their independence. They are 'adjusting.'

The government would have us believe that jobless Canadians are in a state of readiness for the new economic nirvana that Tory policies have spawned. The harsh reality is that the unemployed are adjusting to a life of uncertainty and financial insecurity.

Because no one is unemployed in this country, it is no longer necessary to sustain our income and security programs. These are now seen as 'passive' measures that create reliance on the state. Funny how the need to feed one's family has become a human frailty.

The new 'vision' of Canada is one of an 'active society' in which all members participate. The federal Advisory Council on Adjustment (or what used to be called unemployment) proposed the replacement of passive safety nets with 'trampolines' – initiatives to help Canadian workers prosper in a world of

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international competition. In a speech to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in December 1992, Minister of National Health and Welfare, Benoit Bouchard talked about active programming. He lauded his government's Unemployment Insurance reforms which shifted resourced from "passive income maintenance" to "active employment measures."

There is a serious problem with this social policy newspeak. The bright, optimistic words mask the fact that the economic state of the country is dismal. Minister Bouchard referred in his speech to the "opportunities for self-reliance." The federal Consultation Paper on Prosperity Through Competitiveness put forward the government's view that "the 1990's can be a time of opportunity for Canada." Where are all these employment 'opportunities' into which workers will be sprung? There are not enough jobs to go around, and too many of them are low-paid, no-future jobs that cannot support an individual, let alone a family. Where are the well-paid, highly-skilled jobs that we are assured exist if only we actively sought them?

The social policy newspeak is also unfair. Talk of a new 'active' society conveys an implicit message that Canadians have sat back and let unemployment happen to them. The responsibility for the problem has been cleverly shifted from the government policies that underlie the current economic mess onto the shoulders of the millions of unfortunate women and men who have lost their jobs.

If the government were truly serious about creating an active society, then it would introduce economic policies that

address the real issue: the inability of the economy to sustain, let alone create, decent jobs. Rather than blaming 'inactive' Canadians for the financial woes of this country, the government itself would become 'active.' It would pursue a vigorous policy of investment in our economic infrastructure and in human resources.

While the fields of employment and income security are the battlegrounds in which the word weapons have been most frequently deployed, we should not forget the rest of the arsenal.

'Partnership' is the ubiquitous phrase without which any political document cannot leave home. It really means privatization. 'Empowerment' is the politically correct word of the week. No wonder it is so popular with governments – it really means 'don't bother me with your problem.' Then there's sharing the responsibility – a warm, fuzzy expression for 'it's time to start charging user fees.' What's next – a count of the number of 'outdoorspersons' in the Census? After all, there are no homeless people in Canada.

All this work magic has made the social policy community very wary of the announcement that the federal government will be conducting a major 'review' of social programs early in the new year. The last time I checked the official government book of euphemisms, it listed the following for the word 'review': major dismantling, fundamental restructuring, open assault.

Let's not be fooled by kind, gentle and seemingly benign words that mask a potentially destructive social agenda. If we want to debate the place of social policy and

social programs in this country, let's have an intelligent, informed public discussion.

Let's talk about social spending – what it means, how much it is, how it is being used and what it contributes to this country. Let's do battle with facts and figures rather than linguistic weapons. The sooner we stop creating 'national visions' the words that try to make problems like unemployment and

poverty go away, the closer we will be to debating these problems both openly and honestly.

Let's put some clothes back on the emperor.

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