



Bad Language in High Office

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Language matters. At its best it can inform, unite, and inspire. At its worst it can mislead, divide, and denigrate.

Several members of the federal cabinet have had unfortunate lapses in their use of language in recent months. Most famously, John Baird was heard dismissing the City of Toronto's infrastructure stimulus application in the rudest of terms, saying that Toronto could "F__ Off", which we will paraphrase as Go Forth and Multiply. This was not surprising from the boisterous Baird, but far below what one might expect from a senior minister of the Government of Canada.

More disturbing was a recent quote in Maclean's magazine from Immigration Minister Jason Kenney. In a comment on criticism of the government's handling of the refugee system and its large backlogs, Kenney referred to critics as "the tinfoil hat brigade," and suggested they should "take off their tinfoil hats and deal with reality."

For those unfamiliar with the tinfoil hat reference, it is a term related to the generally discredited notion that

wearing a hat made of tin foil will protect the wearer from various rays and waves in the atmosphere. More particularly, it has become a slang term for being paranoid, or believing in conspiracy theories and other nefarious plots.

Clearly by using this term, Kenney sought to discredit critics as less than mentally competent.

This is part of a disturbing instinct by conservative commentators like Martin Collacott of the Fraser Institute, the right wing consultancy, of dismissing other points of view as unreasonable. The likes of Collacott dismiss other commentaries on immigration as being the preserve of "the refugee lobby" or such "special interest" groups. This implies that there is a high degree of self-interest and self-serving going on, so the views can be dismissed as special pleading.

There are a good many people in Canada who favour improving the current refugee acceptance and appeals process, increasing our refugee intake, and increasing our immigration levels too. They feel that immigrants and refugees have been important building blocks for Canada, and will continue to be. They argue that improving our capacity to attract and admit newcomers is important for Canada. They engage in the debate because they feel it is important for Canada to

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talk about these things. Some of them draw an income from providing professional services in immigration and refugee matters, much as Fraser pays its various employees and consultants. To suggest this disqualifies them from the discourse is unreasonably cynical.

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Jason Kenney is capable of holding an informed debate on the matters in his portfolio. More important, he is a minister of the Government of Canada, and has a duty to use language fairly.

Language matters, and the behaviour of our government matters.