

Introduction to *Watson's Dictionary of Weasel Words, Contemporary Clichés, Cant & Management Jargon*.

‘Political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.’

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

‘Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.’

Toni Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*, 1993

‘Project facilitation is the key tool to leverage excellence from the mediocre.’

Vital Places Consultancy 2004

In *As You Like It*, Jacques says he can suck ‘melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs’. The President of the United States is no less like a weasel when he says a search of Iraq has found ‘weapons of mass destruction-related program activities’; and the Prime Minister of Australia is a match for his American friend when he asks us to recognise a distinction between ‘core’ and ‘non-core promises’. Our two leaders have sucked the meaning out of the words; and the result is just as melancholy. They are shells of words: words from which life has gone, facsimiles, frauds, corpses.

Weasel words are the words of the powerful, the treacherous and the unfaithful, spies, assassins and thieves. Bureaucrats and ideologues love them. Tyrants cannot do without them. The Newspeak of Orwell’s *1984* is an invention, but also a satire on real states such as the Soviet Union where death from starvation and abuse in slave camps was recorded by officials as ‘failure of the heart muscle’. Were any five words ever more melancholy than this?

Totalitarian states use weasel words to hide truth and slew or complicate meaning. They use them, as they use clichés and other dead forms, to exercise and maintain power. Language, as Stalin knew, is an essential instrument of terror. For all the people who were killed or imprisoned as ‘enemies of the revolution’ in the empire he

ruled, or as ‘enemies of the Reich’ in Hitler’s Germany, a great many more were cowed, gulled or anaesthetised into dull-witted obedience by the bastardised and depleted language of those regimes. To speak the words the powerful speak is to obey them, or at least to give up all outward signs of freedom. Stalin was not the first tyrant to be so feared that those around him preferred to imitate even his malapropisms than give him any reason to think they were not in awe of his authority.

The same mimicry can be expected wherever the official language is a kind of code that we must at least appear to understand, or be excluded. It happens in democracies, and in businesses and government departments. Today it is found everywhere the language of the information age is (compulsorily) spoken; everywhere the management revolution has been; everywhere marketing goes. This is language without possibility. It cannot convey humour, fancy, feelings, nuance or the varieties of experience. It is cut off and cuts us off from provenance – it has no past. This dead, depleted, verbless jargon is becoming the language of daily life. The death of language is not being brought about by absent commas and misplaced apostrophes, or even by neglected grammar. Foolish as that neglect is, the real disease is in the system: in the new models of business organisation, in the triumph of economics. It is there in the cant of *competitive advantage* and *human resources management*, *transparency*, *accountability*: in the clichés, *consumer*, *client*, *key*, *core*, *going forwards*, *at the end of the day*, *outcomes-based*. It is there in the pompous lunacy of management jargon which reaches from the world’s biggest corporations and government agencies, including military and intelligence agencies, to primary schools where children now use PowerPoint in English presentations and are taught to call the conclusions of their History essays *product*. Language has been made the machine of business and politics in the information age. But it cannot survive the experience and maintain its power to amuse, enchant, invent, comfort. It can’t carry ideas and sentiments, bear the culture and be the culture’s chief glory. It can’t be machinery first and language second. It can’t live with the new tyranny.

It is in a democracy that the term ‘weasel word’ first appears: in the United States, around the end of the nineteenth century. In 1916 Theodore Roosevelt declared that the ‘tendency to use what have been called weasel words was “one of the defects of

our nation”.’ You can have universal training or you can have voluntary training, but when you use the word “voluntary” to qualify the word “universal”, you are using a weasel word,’ he said: ‘it has sucked all the meaning out of “universal”.’ Teddy’s Presidential cousin, Franklin, later complained about the same tendency in speeches sent him from the State Department, a place where one should expect to find it. The affairs of states make for weasely professions, and none more so than diplomacy. But diplomacy, along with fullblown espionage, may be the only ones where weasel words have a claim to being justified.

Politicians readily convince themselves that weaseling is no less essential in their affairs. When certain remarks of Richard Nixon’s turned out to have been untrue, his minders described them as ‘inoperative’. John Howard and his ministers chose words that persuaded the public to believe that the refugees on a sinking boat had thrown their children into the sea, and that the government was right, therefore, to stop them landing in Australia. These people seeking asylum in Australia were ‘not the sort of people’ Australians wanted in this country. It is possible that only weasel words could put Howard and his ministers beyond the reach of their better feelings, and give them up to bastardry. More direct and pungent language might have made the lie unbearable. This is not to assume that there were better angels in their nature to be found, but to remind us that this language anaesthetises both the users and the used. It poisons politics: the politicians, the media, the public service and the voters. At a recent Senate hearing into that incident, a senior public servant was asked if the Prime Minister or his staff had indicated to her the ‘importance and significance’ of her evidence: had they, in other words, leaned on her? She replied, ‘I do not recall that being particularly the case.’ As Teddy Roosevelt might have said, it can be the case or not the case, but when you use ‘particularly’ to qualify ‘the case’ you suck all the meaning out of it. And this, as anyone can see, was the intention from the start.

Politicians and their hirelings do not have the habit to themselves. They just have less shame than the rest of us. Bill Clinton’s, ‘It depends on what the meaning of “is” is’, lays claim to being in a class of its own. This is *world’s best practise* weaselling. But he was only following a universal instinct to use weasel words, cliches and jargon as shields against attack, as camouflage to escape detection, as smokescreens or vapour to blind or repel anyone sniffing out the truth about us. We use them with intent, and

we parrot them without thinking. Adverbs and adjectives do a lot of the work: *perhaps, maybe, possibly, basically, realistically speaking*. But then, through our employment, education or our addiction to fashion, we have likely developed a habit and forgotten the other way of communicating; so that we might say that *realistically speaking, the bottom line is basically that we will evaluate the issue in its context, and basically commit ourselves to endeavouring to achieve a more appropriate scenario with better outcomes for all stakeholders*. Habit or instinct, the effect is the same: we escape with the truth (even if it is not known to us), just as the weasel, also acting from habit or instinct, escapes with the substance of the egg. Escape is made easier of course by the soporific effect that dead words have on our fellow human beings.

‘Dead’ is the right word. Language, as Toni Morrison says, is part system, part a ‘living thing over which one has control’; but in the main it is an ‘agency – an act with consequences’. The more we listen to the public language of our times, the more we are driven to believe that it has been gutted for the specific purpose of denying us that agency, denying consequences, denying control over a living thing. We are left with the system, the shell: ‘a suit of armour ... from which the knight departed long ago’. We might resist this deceit more fiercely if we could only stay awake. Getting angry when people write to say we must *ensure that we develop a shared understanding of the core initiatives and to discuss key issues that emerge*, is like sounding off at a cloud of ether. Just as we begin to feel the irritation the lights start going out: *in addition, each construct requires the central office staff to engage deeply with the concepts that underpin each of the initiatives...[and}...a range of processes have been used to explore issues and gather feedback from different stakeholders to inform our thinking*.

It is likely that by the time readers of this newsletter, from a Deputy Secretary in a branch of an education department came to the part about ‘gathering *feedback*’ they were incapable of gathering anything. Had it been their first contact with such words, an intelligent reaction might have been conceivable: but in education departments this is Standard English. The words are to information age workers what sugar cane is to a cane cutter, peas to a pea-picker, rivets to a worker in a rivet factory; but cane, peas and rivets are more easily defined and the work that goes into producing them has a

clearer shape to it than *information processing* - or *knowledge management* or *implementing strategies for key deliverables* in HR.

Ten words in one paragraph from this typical ‘communication’ are management cliches. *Core, key, initiative, engage, ensure, understanding, underpin, processes, stakeholders, issues*: these and about fifty others will appear in every internal document, every press release, flyer, annual report, internal memo, advertisement, presentation, strategy meeting, workshop, letter and speech. Another hundred or so will turn up almost as often in a relentless, stupefying stream. Workers these days will see and hear *issue, deliver, deliverables, drive, drivers, implement, focus, customer-focus, strategic, operational* – and in every case, if they still have memories and retain the will to remember, they could call up a dozen other better words.

But they must wonder – where wonder is still possible - if it is worth recalling living words when their colleagues use the dead ones and people higher up in the organisation insist on them: when the corpses are part of the culture, the corporate DNA. And when on the radio talk shows before and after work politicians and business people talk about *expanding the package, exiting the industry, an output management focus, a serious issue as we go forward and inviting anyone who’s had an impact from this historic rezoning and increasing of the environmental protection of the reef to apply for structural adjustment*. Far from questioning this drivel, the interviewers parrot it back. They never ask what is meant by *output management focus*. They never say, ‘Spare us the jargon, the spin you’ve rehearsed. Spare us any rezoning that’s “historic”.’

After eight or ten hours of this every day, who will have the strength left to resist the fatuous ten second grabs on radio and TV News? Will anyone be watching the interview later in the night? Not when they know they are likely to hear from their masters the same words they have heard all day:

*Well, the rules will say that you have to be negatively impacted and you will have to prove to the adjustment authority that you have been negatively impacted, and I think all Australians would agree that saving the Barrier Reef, saving it for future generations, protecting that unique environment is absolutely vital and they would want to ensure that anyone who was*

*negatively impacted was able to get structural adjustment and assistance because of that decision.*

If in your darkening brain a light still flickers, you might wonder if the government minister means to say that people adversely affected by new regulations will be paid compensation. But when the interviewer mentions this, the minister barks: ‘No, it’s not *compensation*. It’s *structural adjustment and assistance following the historic rezoning*.’ *Compensation*, we can safely presume, would *negatively impact* the politics of the *package*. It would be tantamount to using the word ‘money’, for God’s sake! And when they get a whiff of money the mob always leap to the conclusion that at least some it is theirs. Say *compensation* and the whole country will want some. So stick to *structural adjustment and assistance* and don’t forget *historic rezoning* – *historic rezoning* is very good, it makes it sort of...historic.

By now who cares? Not the interviewer. He lets it pass. No one is alert enough to notice that as much as the Barrier Reef, the language needs saving for future generations. And did we think or hear ourselves say, as we shuffled off to bed, that an interactive television might be less *negatively impactful* on our *lifestyle*? As we go *forward*?

This Dictionary was prompted by the public response to *Death Sentence: the Decay of Public Language*. It has grown (or been *leveraged*?) from that book, and it is a kind of companion to it. It fills it out the argument with examples that convey more vividly, I think, how far the decay has spread. If it induces irritation, curiosity, laughter or rage – above all, if it provokes rebellion - the Dictionary will have fulfilled its purpose. As Morrison said, this language ‘must be rejected, altered and exposed’.

People may use the Dictionary for the practical purposes of discovering what these new-fangled words and phrases mean, but they should be warned that it does not provide this enlightenment in every case. Without wishing to escape my obligations, I would say that most often it fails because the words in fact have no meaning, or at least not one that can be described. Moreover, it is possible that no meaning has ever been intended for them. Readers are more likely to see this if they read the entries aloud, either to themselves or to a group. This is also the most amusing – if not the only bearable – way to read this Dictionary. It is, as well, the best way to appreciate

what life is like for people who must speak, read and hear this language every day of their working lives.

By this I mean, people in private and government employment, people who teach and nurse and provide other forms of care, unemployed people, schoolchildren.

Increasing numbers of people. Most people. People who work in organisations that have taken on this language as earlier organisations took on assembly lines and Taylorism. *Death Sentence* can be called successful insofar as it sold well; but also because hundreds of people wrote thankful, angry and amusing letters. Of these, a large proportion contained examples they had encountered at work; or in their children's school reports; in correspondence with their bank, insurance company, their parents' nursing home, a government department or some recently privatised public utility. These people confirmed for me that *Death Sentence* was a small assault on a large but not impregnable enemy. This Dictionary may be seen as another charge against the walls – or, rather, into the swamp. Many of the seven hundred or so entries are drawn from the letters I received after the publication of *Death Sentence*. Others I have picked up at seminars and talks for companies, government agencies and departments. The frustration of the people who work in them, the sense they have that this language is stupid and oppressive and that it denies them a fundamental right, was one inspiration for this second book. The other was the way our leaders imitate the emptiness of management jargon to weasel their way past our better instincts.

I hope this Dictionary proves useful in an ever-widening campaign of mockery and other forms of resistance. *Translate* it into a *tool* of derision. *Migrate* it to a satirical *skill set*. The Dictionary nurtures the subversive hope that the next edition will be smaller, and the one following smaller still, until this original edition becomes a relic of a brief age when the language slipped from our grasp. But we took it back. We made de-weaseling a *key competency* and began to see that not only had our leaders and our institutions mugged us, we had mugged ourselves. We decided to fight back. *So we could move on.*