The 'We' Word

And the Tyranny of the Majority

False collectives—what Americans call 'weasel words'—poison the language we use to talk about public affairs by cobbling together spurious majorities, writes **Roger Kerr**

2003 marked the centenary of George Orwell's birth. Orwell was one of the most profound writers of the 20th century. His two satires on Soviet totalitarianism—*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*—were antidotes to the attractions of ideology and, in the case of *Nineteen Eighty Four*, to attempts to use language as a form of thought control.

We are still familiar with the two features of totalitarian thinking that Orwell exposed, namely, 'doublethink' and 'newspeak'. *Doublethink* refers to the capacity to subscribe to two contradictory beliefs at the same time, as in slogans like 'war is peace', 'freedom is slavery', and so on; *newspeak* was the regime's official language which, by controlling and limiting speech to an officially approved and crudely simplified vocabulary, would make dissenting thoughts literally inconceivable.

Another thinker who was alert to the political implications of language was Friedrich Hayek. In his last book, *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek devoted a chapter, titled 'Our Poisoned Language', to the collectivist bias in the way we talk about public affairs. This is part of Hayek's wider argument that socialism is a throwback to primitive tribalism, in which the tribe could survive only by acting as one.

The central word here is 'society', which of course refers to a group of people but which is often used, tacitly and even unconsciously, to refer to more than that—namely, to a group that has an overriding, collective goal and therefore has to make central decisions, even though societies can and do exist without having collective goals and without central decision-making.

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In modern speech, Hayek writes, the adjective 'social' is applied indiscriminately to a huge number of nouns in a way that undermines their original meanings and recruits them into a collectivist cause. Take the idea of justice. Let's say that this means the fair and impartial application of legal, moral and perhaps customary rules. But precede it with the word 'social' and everything changes. *Social* justice may require redistributing property and treating people unequally. In this way the word 'social' empties the nouns it is applied to of their meaning. Hayek goes on:

> . . . it has in fact become the most harmful instance of what, after Shakespeare's 'I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs' (*As You Like It*, II, 5), some Americans call a 'weasel word'. As a weasel is alleged to be able to empty an egg without leaving a visible sign, so can these words deprive of content any term to which they are prefixed while seemingly leaving them untouched. A weasel word is used to draw the teeth from a concept one is obliged to employ, but from which one wishes to eliminate all implications that challenge one's ideological premises.[1]

Another term that has been almost completely emptied of meaning by being called social is 'right'. A right properly means a sphere of freedom that is protected by law, or a just claim. But nowadays, by being prefixed with 'social' or related words like 'welfare', a right is taken to mean a claim to redistribution that the law enforces. The right to work, for example, by being made a 'social' right, has ceased to mean that the state should not interfere in voluntary labour contracts, and has become a demand that the government guarantees a job to everyone who wants one. This, taken to its logical conclusion, could mean the central direction of labour and severe restrictions on the freedom to enter into labour contracts.

What we have here is a form of linguistic piracy, in which the favourable connotations of a word are hijacked and used for purposes that are often the opposite of those suggested by its original sense. No-one wants to be opposed to rights, but plenty of people are opposed to the limits on government that rights imply. The word 'social' conjures those limits away.

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A related example of this sort of chicanery is the idea of 'fair' trade. Advanced as an alternative to free trade, fair trade simply means protection. Yet free trade is perfectly fair in the sense that it takes place under the rule of law and on a level playing field. But the very term 'fair trade' subtly implies that free trade is unfair, and who wants to be seen to support unfairness? So as the term gains currency, the burden of proof is quietly passed from the advocates of protection to the advocates of free trade.

Hayek's analysis of the collectivist bias of language and especially of the word 'society' can be extended to a range of related and common words. We all know that the communists shamelessly used the term 'the people', in phrases like 'people's republic', to pretend that their regimes were genuine and legitimate expressions of the collective will of their subjects. Yet in the West we often use such terms in similarly distorting, if more subtle, ways. In the public meetings that precede planning decisions, opponents of a proposal to build a supermarket, or a road, or whatever in a locality typically say things like 'the government should listen to the people'. But supporters of the proposals may well say the same thing. When public opinion is divided, each side likes to enlist the notional support of 'the people' to legitimise its stance. What the advocates really mean, of course, is that the government should listen to 'me'.

Again, take the term 'public'. 'Public spending', for example, should literally mean spending undertaken by members of the public. But it has come to mean government spending, regardless of whether the public wants it or approves of it: all the public has to do with it is to pay for it. A

similar distortion appears with the terms 'public sector' and its counterpart, 'private sector'. Some people genuinely believe that the 'public sector' is so called because it embodies the interests of the people as a whole, in contrast to the 'private sector', which embodies the special interests of private businesses. 'Public' is a term that nowadays subtly shifts us from talking about the people as a whole to talking about the government and its agents and employees, and into assuming that anything done by arms of the government is by definition in the common interest.

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Another such term, much loved by politicians, is 'community'. A community, strictly speaking, is a group of people with common interests and experiences, and probably some face-to-face contact. A community so defined has to be rather small: a village, say, or a profession, like 'the medical community'. But sometimes the word is stretched to cover what we should call, perhaps, 'the nation', or 'the general public' if we could trust ourselves to use that term properly. The members of a nation are mostly anonymous and unknown to one another, and have diverse opinions, preferences and experiences. Although they share an historical national identity and a common legal identity as citizens, to describe such a group as a 'community' is to pretend to a higher level of collective sympathies, interests and goals than in fact exists. It tends therefore to expand the agenda of collective decision-making beyond what is necessary, and encourages acquiescence in the aggrandisement of the state.

Of all such terms, 'we' is the most subtle and troublesome. It is a term that we—so to speak—cannot dispense with, and so we risk being trapped into connotations that we don't intend or are unaware of. 'We' can be used in an individualistic sense: 'we' taken as individuals, who can act and make decisions on our own behalf. But it can also be used in a collective sense, meaning that on each issue 'we' have to make a single decision that applies to all of us. For example, after a natural catastrophe, someone might say, 'we should all help the victims'. The words by themselves don't expose two crucial distinctions: whether assistance should be by each of us as individuals or organised on a collective basis; and, if collective, whether it should be voluntary (through donations) or involuntary (through government action financed out of taxes).

But my deeper point is that this ambiguity of 'we' can lead us into collective thinking and coercive action where it isn't necessary. Political rhetoric is full of phrases like 'we as a nation must decide whether we want a national airline/film industry/manufacturing sector/whatever'. This assumes that 'we' have to make a single, collective decision as voters, whereas in reality 'we' as individuals are making that decision every day. If consumers prefer a domestically manufactured product to an imported one, a domestic manufacturing industry or firm will be there to meet the demand; if they prefer the imported product it won't. The demand that 'we as a nation must decide' is to call on people to decide through the political system things that they can readily resolve as individual consumers.

The 'we' word may also be used by members of groups that are smaller than, and contained within, the wider society. In a system that encourages lobbying by special interests and institutionalises 'disadvantaged' minorities, spokespersons of those groups may be tempted into a false collectivism. The media encourage this by commonly treating any member of a disadvantaged minority as automatically representative of that sub-set, as if all its members were unanimous about every issue.

Underlying the individualist and collectivist senses of 'we' is the distinction between what David Green calls 'corporate association' and 'civil association':

> A 'corporate association' is composed of persons united in pursuit of a common interest or objective . . . In the pure form

> of a nation as a corporate association, there is but one overriding national objective.
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> In a nation of 'civil associates', people are united not because they share a concrete goal, or are engaged together in a substantive task, but because they acknowledge the authority of the rules under which they live . . .
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> The task of government under a corporate association is to manage the pursuit of the common goal and to direct individuals as appropriate . . . The task of the state under a civil association is to maintain and enforce the laws, and to supply services such as defence, which must be financed from taxation. The role of government is limited and subject to the law.[2]

As Green notes, if we take society to be a civil association rather than a corporate association, the role of what 'we' collectively have to decide is limited to genuine public goods like law-enforcement and defence—since these are goods that we individually can't otherwise produce in the desired amounts—plus some form of collectively provided social safety net. There are not many genuine public goods, and the number is shrinking with advancing technology. But the constant use of the collective 'we' in political debate tends to push out the agenda of government into areas where we as individuals are capable of looking after ourselves.

Indeed, most of the time the 'we' word is really a disguise for the 'it' word: the government. Those who argue that 'we as a nation' must decide whether we want a manufacturing industry are really saying that, since 'we' as individual consumers have shown that we prefer imports, the government should override those preferences and protect domestic manufacturers from import competition. The scope for special interests to advance under the cover of the 'we' word is obvious.

It is true that sometimes such government intervention does appear to command a degree of popular support, and it is a huge advantage to a special interest seeking government favours when this is the case. Indeed, not only special interests but governments themselves are constantly in the business of testing 'public opinion' with polls, consultations, focus groups, and so on, trying to come up with putative majorities to legitimise their proposals instead of seriously demonstrating that they serve genuine collective interests. But the further away 'we' collectively are taken from 'us' individually, the more contrived, artificial and fragile is the 'majority' that is formed in our name.

For example, advocates of bigger government like to cite opinion polls that appear to show that a majority approves of higher taxes to finance better health, education or welfare benefits. Four major objections can be raised against this. First, the question itself assumes that it is axiomatic that higher taxes actually result in better services. They may well not, but the opinion pollsters don't normally accommodate this possibility. Second, the polls typically present a bogus either-or choice between raising taxes and leaving them unchanged. They exclude the entirely feasible options of charging for some services and lowering taxes to allow more individuals to make private arrangements. So the majority for higher taxes is largely contrived. Third, some of the many beneficiaries may expect others to pay the higher taxes: 'we' doesn't include 'me', as it were. Finally, we tend in the privacy of the polling booth to vote against higher taxes, whatever we think we should say to opinion pollsters. Several Western political parties have lost elections in recent years after promising to increase taxes, or after increasing them when they had promised not to. It is a major problem for opinion polls that respondents may not reveal their true preferences but express preferences that are socially fashionable.

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Again, the collective 'we's that are constantly cobbled together in support of some proposal or other are highly dependent on the phrasing of whatever it is that is being put to us. The question

'Should we protect our manufacturers from import competition?' may be supported by a majority. But if the question were rephrased 'Should the government raise the prices of manufactured goods by levying a tax on manufactured imports?', the majority would be smaller or even non-existent.

If the 'we's that opinion polls record are so precarious, it's not surprising that they can be contradictory as well. A good example comes from the United States in the mid-1990s. In 1994, a new Republican-dominated Congress thought it had a clear mandate to move towards a balanced budget. It duly put up proposals to reduce the growth rate of some welfare entitlement programmes. But no sooner had the proposals been passed than President Clinton vetoed them, invoking the support of a new majority opposing them. Which did US citizens want? A balanced budget or guaranteed entitlement levels? They wanted both. The 'will of the people' may be systematically ambiguous on the decisions that governments make on a daily basis.

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The truth is that few consequences for the respondent hang on the answers given to an opinion pollster, and there is little incentive to make a considered judgment. This is largely true of voting as well, since a single vote hardly ever determines the outcome of an election. But there is some evidence that people take voting relatively seriously. Devotees of the 'we' word might therefore be challenged to consider making more use of the system of citizens initiated referenda. They are unlikely to do so because, unlike with opinion polls, the results of a referendum cannot be easily manipulated. But the challenge could at least inject a little linguistic hygiene into the Towers of Babel that politicians, lobbyists, intellectuals and journalists have constructed in modern democracies.

This is not to suggest that the collective 'we' must be confined to the limited range of collective or public goods that a government has to fund or produce in a civil association. Although the members of a society like Australia or New Zealand are for the most part unknown to one another, we have common bonds and share a common destiny. A civil association does not conscript its members into overriding collective purposes, but nor is it merely a collection of atomised individuals who have nothing to do with one another. We have our voluntary collective activities, like sports, churches, associations of all sorts, and our annual timetable of festivals and rituals. When referring to our common life, we can use the 'we' word without ambiguity or sleight of hand. The problem arises when our common life is made the basis for what are usually spurious majorities for expanding the scope of government beyond its necessary limits. Such majorities typically reflect only the shifting and temporary coalitions that our political system produces, and government that is beholden to them ceases to be the agent of the society and becomes an instrument of coercion.

So beware the 'we' word in politics, since, despite its apparently communitarian connotations, it so often portends a weakening rather than a strengthening of social cohesion. A key feature of constitutional democracy is the protection of minorities and the rights of dissenting, law-abiding individuals. Exercising through politics the so-called 'tyranny of the majority', and trampling on individual rights, are recipes for social discord at best and a slide into an Orwellian world at worst.

Endnotes

1. F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp.116-17.
2. David Green, *From Welfare State to Civil Society: Towards Welfare that Works in New Zealand* (Wellington: New Zealand Business Roundtable, 1996), pp.5–6.