

Orwell remains a troubling and disconcerting figure, partly because he was himself a deeply contradictory figure. A man born into a relatively affluent, middle class family, radicalised by his experiences in colonial Burma and his time among the downtrodden in Paris and London, who fought for the Trotskyite left during the Spanish Civil War but who denounced communism as the greatest threat to civilised man. In the 1930s Orwell identified with the radical left and pacifism (despite fighting in Spain), yet in the late 1930s referred to himself as a 'Tory anarchist'. Can such a person teach us anything about what it means to be political in our contemporary society?

For all his faults and contradictions Orwell remains a compelling figure for his commitment to truthfulness and decency in public life, and for his firm belief that there are some things that should remain beyond the political realm (Orwell would have hated the 1960s slogan, 'the personal is the political'). Contrary to those who argue that with the collapse of totalitarianism Orwell has had his day—Glover is right when he says that people who have only read *Animal Farm* and *1984* could make such a claim—Orwell remains the secular patron saint of people who value free speech, decency, civility and our liberal democratic system of government, whether they be on the right or the left. What is needed now is a book that deciphers what Orwell means to us today, without claiming him for the partisans of any faction.

Reviewed by Martin Sheehan

Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language
by Don Watson
Random House Australia
2003, 198pp, \$29.95,
ISBN 1 74051 206 5

In *Politics and the English Language* George Orwell described the derelict condition of contemporary English. Born on 25 June 1903, the centenary of Orwell's birth last year and the prominence of his essay—since its publication in 1946 it has become one of the most frequently cited in the English language—provide good reasons to revisit this problem, its cause and prognosis.

Alas, Don Watson's disappointing book gives us many contemporary Australian examples but none of the insights and analysis of Orwell's seminal essay. Watson hints but does not explicitly show why 'public language' pervades big organisations; he notes that public language is the language of the walking dead and of authoritarian cant, but does not outline its pernicious consequences like Orwell did; and Watson omits the critical point that public language is the language of 'educated fools'.

According to Orwell, 'modern English prose . . . consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house'. He denounced stale and pretentious images, imprecise meanings and meaningless words, dead metaphors, flabbiness and abstraction. Burdened with these loads, 'the writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose.'

Watson shows that this characteristic of modern English prose, which he calls 'public language', has become even more pronounced since Orwell's death in 1950. Why? Watson offers no explicit diagnosis. But it is telling that neither Orwell nor Watson criticise the language of the farmer or grazier, skilled tradesman or small business owner. The subsidiaries of Berkshire Hathaway Inc., one of America's largest conglomerates, employ more than 120,000 people and generate billions of profit. Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest men, is its Chairman and owns a plurality of its shares; but its headquarters, with fewer than 20 staff, more closely resembles a small business than a behemoth. Buffett is renowned for his clear and incisive language: so much so that the US Securities and Exchange Commission asked him to write a preface to its *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents*.

Perhaps the dreary prose that Orwell and Watson criticise lacks life because its authors (usually academics, public or private sector bureaucrats, management consultants and politicians) are themselves lifeless. Unlike the owners of small businesses, users of public language are irresponsible in the sense that their employment and remuneration are seldom tied to the achievement of predetermined results. In these organisations, the boss shoots the arrow of managerial performance and then hastily paints the bull's eye around the spot where it lands. Despite their incessant chatter about 'outcomes', bureaucrats are promoted on the basis of conformity and credentials rather than results.

Watson's book falls far short of Orwell's essay in a second respect. Orwell not only described but also analysed the use of language as an

instrument of sloppy thinking, self-deception, the deception of others—and in extreme cases inhumanity and mass murder. The crux of the problem is that language ‘becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts’. As an example, Orwell invited his readers to consider a comfortably-tenured academic defending Soviet totalitarianism. ‘The academic cannot say outright, “I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.” Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: “while freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.”’

This brings us to Watson’s third—and I believe most glaring—omission: public language is the language of ‘educated fools’. During the First World War, writes the syndicated columnist Joe Sobran (‘Now They Tell Us’, 3 June 2003), the British writer C.S. Lewis overheard a group of American soldiers. He was startled to discover that they assumed that their government routinely lied to them. They were not the least bit outraged; they simply took it for granted that ‘their’ politicians and bureaucrats were incorrigible liars. Perhaps because the government was exposing the soldiers and non-combatants to mortal danger, and it feared that morale would suffer if they knew the true extent of this danger, the government did not trust the soldiers enough to tell

them the truth. Realising this, the soldiers reciprocated: they did not trust the government enough to tell them the truth.

Lewis was shocked that the soldiers were not shocked. Fortunately, an average man is less easily bamboozled than a typical Oxbridge academic. People who have spent a large amount of time in educational institutions (and who almost invariably confuse this elapsed time with ‘education’ and therefore regard themselves as ‘educated’) are far more susceptible to the lies, cant and propaganda of public language than people who leave school early, get a proper job and join the real world. People who have spent much time in schools, colleges and universities may flatter themselves that ‘education’ creates a rational and sceptical outlook and hence an immunity to propaganda. In fact, says Sobran, ‘it may do just the reverse. It may create in us a disposition to settle for fancy words and high-sounding slogans instead of results’. From the French Revolution and through the horrors of Hitler, Stalin and Mao, ‘intellectuals’ have figured disproportionately prominently among the leading apologists and blind supporters of dictatorship and state-sanctioned violence (see in particular Thomas Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions*, Basic Books, 1996).

Peter Jones reports in ‘Language Barriers’ (*The Spectator* 14 June 2003) that today’s universities are factories that produce babble rather than scepticism, and rigidity rather than reason. ‘Turgid, repetitive, pompous, pretentious bombast is the order of the day . . . This is precisely what Orwell

was complaining about—not thinking about what is being said but reaching for the pre-packaged words and phrases and letting them choose the meaning.’ Not many years ago, élites mocked ordinary Australians’ grammar and accent. Today, the ruling language is laughable and its speakers talk rubbish. Or, as a politician, academic or bureaucrat would likely say, ‘at this juncture all issues are not progressed in the context of a transparent discourse that facilitates the proactive value proposition committed to the achievement of overall enhanced participative outcomes for the community.’

A bureaucratized—and therefore largely irresponsible—society demands and expects verbal rubbish. Kate Jennings, writing in *BOSS Magazine* (June 2002), put it best: ‘paradoxically, we all know that business language is nothing but cuttlefish ink. We don’t expect corporate communications to be composed of anything but illogic, exaggeration, evasion and outright lies. But at the same time we allow ourselves to be seduced by its relentless optimism, its aggressively positive outlook. We don’t want the truth.’

Reviewed by Chris Leithner

