A DEFORMATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS: A PROTEST

The left should not be allowed to annexe the term 'progressive', argues **William Coleman**

Mankind is governed by names
—Edward Gibbon

A paradox

A well-known curiosity of political history is that the adversaries of a political movement have often succeeded in fastening upon their object of loathing a pejorative name. Thus the supporters of William II were successfully dubbed Whigs ('horse thieves'), the supporters of the House of Stuart branded Tories ('bandits'), the nativist American Party of the 1850s is universally known as the Know Nothings, and the anti-Lenin faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party is forever tagged the Mensheviks ('minority').

Recent Australian experience, however, provides a still greater oddity; not the spectacle of the opponents of some political tendency attaching a pejorative to that tendency, but its opponents freely granting the opposed tendency an approbative appellation.

I refer to the practice of denoting the left as 'progressive'. I find no surprise in the left referring to itself thus: to annexe approbatives will be a concern of every political tendency. What is remarkable is the willingness of the left's critics to grant them this accolade. And I do not refer to marginal voices. Paul Murray, Paul Kelly and Nick Cater are all prominent critics of the left that have participated in the usage. Perhaps these three critics may not quite share the depth of conviction of some that the left will not produce progress but will yield up instead a society that is fractious, prejudiced and philistine; an unhappier, stupider and poorer society; one starved of justice, and bestrewn with wrecked and wasted lives. But, for all that, none of these three could be described as 'left'.

So there is a puzzle. To press my perplexity: if the left was to style itself as 'decent', 'practical' and 'farsighted', one would not expect to see conservatives and classical liberals commence referring to the left as 'the decents', located on 'the practical side' of politics, and committed to various 'farsighted causes'.

How is it that with the word 'progressive' the left has been so gratuitously afforded a rhetorical advantage by their adversaries? And is it possible that, for all my evident bafflement, the practice can claim some exoneration?

Improper names

The one defence that has been put to me is simply that the left refers to itself as progressive, and by implication invites the world to join it. But to insouciantly assent to this behest is to completely misunderstand the differing functions of 'proper names' and 'common nouns'.

In a liberal society one has a very broad right to choose one's own 'proper name', be it the personal name of an individual or the title

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of a corporate body. Tellingly, the 'proper' in 'proper name' is etymologically cognate with 'property'. Thus in liberal societies your proper name is your property, and you can do just about whatever you like with it. This right is heavily infringed in illiberal societies; in totalitarian societies the state has on occasion abolished it, and chosen even personal names of swathes of persons.

I fully respect the very broad right of any political entity to choose their own 'proper name'. To illustrate: there exists today a party that is formally entitled Australian Progressives. I will refer to them as the Australian Progressives. One reason why I am content to do so, and why liberal societies are so free with proper names, is that they are usually harmless. As John Stuart Mill intones with deadly accuracy, 'A proper name [is] a word that answers the purpose of showing what thing it is that we are talking about but not of telling anything about it'. Quite. And most people understand that. Granted, that understanding can be abused to the point that a proper name is contrived to mislead. Thus, notoriously, Australia's industrial relations landscape once included a body that styled itself the Australian Workers' Union Workplace Reform Association. But—putting aside actual 'passing off' in the legal sense—the harm of reducing property rights over proper names to prevent deception will surely outweigh the costs of enduring its episodic abuse.[1]

By profound contrast with a proper name, the denotation of a common noun is not the property of anyone. It is not annexable by anyone, including the left. Neither is it alienable by anyone, including the right. And thankfully so.

> 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
>
> "The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'[2]

Precisely. Part of not having masters is having a language that is nobody's property.

This point was brought out most powerfully in the last two works of George Orwell, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. To Orwell the commanding height of all the commanding heights was not electricity; it was not steel: it was language. Ordinary industry nowhere appears in *1984*, but the reader will recall in the latter novel the complete nationalisation of the English language in the form of Newspeak. This included 'five year plans' for the elimination of vocabulary. But in Orwell's vision the removal of words was not the only way of destroying language in order to achieve the mastery sought by Humpty Dumpty, Squealer and Big Brother. Another strategy, that evidently fascinated Orwell, was the draining of words of all meaning. This is one of the most palpable and bizarre outcomes of the nationalisation of language in Orwell; it is not that people believe falsehoods or tell lies, but that they enunciate with all sign of passion the meaningless.

> All pigs are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Nominalism as nihilism

To summarise so far: against any airy concession of the word 'progressive', I am, in the most general terms, invoking the imperative of all speakers to respect meaning. To not call Peace what they believe is War. To not call Freedom what they judge to be Slavery.

In more diagnostic terms, I have traced the gratuitous bestowal of 'progressive' to an insufficient acknowledgement of the distinct functions of proper names and common nouns.

But I have a feeling there is a second language failure behind the problem at hand: a failure I will call a misapplied nominalism. By nominalism I do not refer to the philosophical doctrine that 'Only particulars exist'; but to one of its illegitimate descendants, 'Words are just words'. The misused nominalism lurking in the mischief at issue would run thus: 'Symbols are arbitrary, aren't they? A rose by any another name will smell as sweet, right? Surely we wish to avoid definitional debates!'. This nominalism insinuates a carelessness in the use of language without succeeding in exonerating

such carelessness. The meanings of words are not 'arbitrary'; they are conventional. What is at stake is respect for meaning, not a nicety of definition. And a trivial truth about the smell of roses will not successfully degrade the imperative to respect meaning, as anyone who ordered a dozen roses for $10 each but gets a dozen dandelions will certainly grant.

Progress as a false cosmology

The argumentation above reduces to a call to conservatives and classical liberals not to confer an approbative on what they do not approve.

But beyond that fairly unarguable appeal, I would suggest that conservatives and classical liberals be chary of deploying 'progress' at all. This is not because progress is a necessarily spurious category to the minds of conservatives and classical liberals. They are happy to conjure with Creation and Destruction; Development and Decay. And they grant that for some realities 'progress' is a more effective descriptor than any other. They do not, however, believe that progress serves as an organising category of social experience: no more than, say, 'goodness' does.

By contrast the left does take progress to be such an organising category of social experience. This is because the natural habitat of progress is the natural sciences and technology, and the left has, in the past 30 years, returned to the veneration of science that it was originally given to ('What is impossible to Science?': Friedrich Engels). True: for about a generation from the 1950s the left had been inclined to disregard scientists as mere technical managers of the abominated system, doubtless busy perfecting an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile or a new plastic bag. But today, in a kind of neo-scientism, the left is fully restored to its old Comtean vision of scientists as society's priestly class, providing it guidance and salvation. Conservatives decline to join in this reverence. Conservatives, with classical liberals, completely reject the natural sciences as a master-paradigm of human existence. They reject it as the sole epistemology; and they reject it as a system of life. (Does a tradition make progress? Does art progress?)

There is a second reason why progress constitutes a category that the left will have more genuine call of than their adversaries: a vision of progress implicitly assumes that every change constitutes either some piece of progress or some regress. In other words, every state of the world is either better than every other state, or worse than every state. Both conservatives and classical liberals completely reject such a cosmology of valuation. It is this rejection that is behind the conservative inclination to the status quo, or classical liberals' rejection of anything more than the 'umpire state'. It is *not* that conservatives think that the present state is better than every other state of the world; but they frequently think it no worse; and with the help of one very mild premise—that there should be a reason for the state to compel things—we arrive at a deference towards the present state. By contrast, the vision of progress—every state of the world is either better or worse than every other state—creates a perpetual case for change.

It is a basic principle of political tactics to avoid the preferred categorisations/conceptualisations of one's adversaries. This is enough, I suggest, for conservatives to keep well away from 'progress talk'.

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'Liberal'—a precedent

The struggle for ownership of an approbative term in the 19th century has some parallels—and divergences—with the current contention over progressive.

I refer to the word 'liberal'.

The approbative sense of 'liberal' is the original one, emerging in English at the close of the Middle Ages. It referred to the affects that are befitting a free status, as distinct from servile status: namely, the generous, the magnanimous, the open-handed (see C.S. Lewis's (1960) particular study of this point[3]). For centuries that approbative denotation comprehended the word's entire reference.

It was only at the opening of the 19th century that 'liberal' obtained, within the English language, a political meaning: 'favourable to political freedoms'. From this parent stem there emerged two entirely contrary political meanings of the word:

'Liberal' could refer to a social philosophy that promoted freedom, as both a useful means and as a valued end; or

'Liberal' could refer to a social philosophy that demoted freedom, as both a useful means and a valued end.

Briefly, 'liberal' could refer to a social philosophy that saw legislation as a salvation, or one that saw legislation as a curse.

This paradox of the same source giving rise to such antithetical semantic offspring perhaps reflects the ambiguity in 'freedom' that was so well descried by Benjamin Constant, and captured in his contrast between the Ancient Liberty—that esteemed collective choice (and 'democracy'), and the Modern Liberty—that esteems individual choice (and 'rights').

Be that as it may, by the late 19th century two entirely contrary usages of 'liberal' were well established. The first manifested in the Liberal Party of Great Britain, and within New South Wales; and the second was established in Australia outside of New South Wales, especially Victoria. Thus with respect to this word, Australia was one nation, divided by a common language.

One classical liberal of New South Wales, Bruce Smith, was sufficiently provoked by the use of the word liberal to denote 'salvation through legislation' that in 1887 he wrote, *Liberty and Liberalism*, protesting 'the growing tendency toward undue interference by the state with individual liberty, private enterprise and the rights of property'.[4] Tactically, he was justified not to concede to the opponents of his social philosophy a term that remained an approbative term. Especially when there was no spirit of generosity in the actions of the persons adhering to the tendency he deplored; such as John Forrest—a self-described liberal in the Victorian sense—swanking to the Federation Convention of 1897 that he had passed legislation to deny Chinese persons the right to mine; or John Quick, who had successfully removed even naturalised Chinese from Victoria's electoral roll. One sees nothing generous here; one sees the unsparing pursuit of small advantage by means of removing from others rights that you enjoy yourself.

There is another reason for Bruce Smith to have wrangled so hard; one which brings back to mind the dangers of abolishing words. John Stuart Mill once dryly observed that naming does not confer existence. But, going in the other direction, an existence will be hard to recognise without a name. And the liberalism of a Smith, Hume and a Mill needs its own name; just as every philosophy needs a name of its own; both to bring out the unity of its dispersed but composing elements, and to distinguish it from other philosophies that it will be spuriously conflated with.[5] Thus Milton Friedman in the 1950s struggled to preserve the British denotation of liberal—as denoting the liberalism of a Locke, Hume and a Mill—in the face of the impregnably established US usage of liberalism as 'salvation by legislation'. He failed, but a valuable legacy of his struggle was the coinage of the term 'classical liberal'.

We owe, then, a debt to Friedman for caring about the meaning of words. I suggest we might struggle to not let the future be robbed of the meaning of another useful word—'progress'.

Endnotes

1 The distinction between proper names and common nouns can falter. Titles, for example, can press the distinction to breaking point. A tyrant may be formally titled a 'President X', or 'Chairman Y'. A grammarian may deem these to be proper names, just as much as Duce and Dear Leader surely are. And such proper names probably do possess some power to mislead, at least for some for a time. In concurrence, Gibbon deems Augustus to have established 'an absolute monarchy disguised in the form of a commonwealth'. In keeping with this project, the 'crafty tyrant', notes Gibbon, preserved 'with the most anxious care' the names 'of the ancient administration'.

2 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), chapter 6.

3 C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

4 *Liberty and Liberalism* is available as a CIS Classic at http://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2015/07/c1.pdf

5 In 'The Epic Triumph of Liberalism and Its Tragic Betrayal' Dan Sanchez has identified a cost of the use of the word libertarianism in place of liberalism. Essentially a 1970s revival of a term in desuetude—the Colorado Libertarian Party of 1971 is cited as an early example of the revival—the term 'libertarianism' has served to disconnect the outlook it refers to from its historical intellectual heritage. See https://fee.org/articles/the-epic-triumph-of-liberalism-and-its-tragic-betrayal/