

EMERGING ISSUES by BILL BARNES

We Don't Know What We're Talking About

Bill Barnes

Some time before 64 years and four months ago, Eric Blair wrote an essay about the misuse of words in public discussion. The essay has echoed down the decades; its themes are often heard in new essays (like this one) on sloppy and misleading use of language that has political consequences.

The April 1946 essay argued that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." But the "process is reversible." If one "gets rid of bad habits, one can think more clearly." Thinking more clearly is a "necessary first step toward political regeneration." Among the bad habits is "meaningless words."

Blair used the pen name of George Orwell. He titled the essay "Politics and the English Language." (As Orwell, he also wrote *Animal Farm* and 1984, both of which reflect his concern with the political power of language.)

Orwell's critique about meaningless words applies today. For example, what is "sustainability?" Well, then, how about "civic engagement?" "the free market?" "closing the borders?" "livability?" "smart growth?" Each of these terms encompasses such a wide and changing range of idiosyncratic meanings that use of it tells us little about the topic.

Then there's "green." Kermit The Frog warned that "it's not easy being green," but enthusiasts are not daunted by puppets.

And let's not even get started on "economic development" or "regionalism."

These and many other terms are widely used. They have a certain force, but it's not clear what they mean or rather, it is clear that they mean far too many things.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," asks 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."

In contrast, Orwell urges that we "let the meaning chose the word, and not the other way around."

Of the two, Orwell is right, but Humpty offers the better description of how we talk about politics and policy.

What are the consequences of this vagueness and multiplicity of meanings? One is that conversation is rendered meaningless; we all merely talk to ourselves. So, everyone can be enthusiastic about "sustainability," and everyone is dissatisfied with the action that ensues because it's not what they meant.

A recent study by Eric Zeemering in the *Urban Affairs Review* investigated what "sustainability" means to local officials throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. He found that the term has "multiple meanings" to them including, for example:

mixed use near transit hubs, green building standards, pedestrian and bike routes, retaining current businesses, human capital development, neighborhood revitalization, and resident participation.

**Some time before 64 years
and four months ago,
Eric Blair wrote an essay
about the misuse of words
in public discussion.**

Similarly, Ben Berger, writing in *Perspectives on Politics*, declares that "Civic engagement is ready for the dustbin," not because public involvement is useless but because the term "means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing." It includes the "entire 'kitchen sink' of public and private goods": numberless political processes and issues, as well as all kinds of participation in social groups and activities.

Rich Harwood, a long-time civic engagement advocate, recently "banned" the term from his organization's work because it "has become a catch-all." It promotes mindless activity, which, in turn, causes people to "lose sight of our real purpose."

Another currently prevalent example of Orwellian "meaningless words" is the "creative class," the latest bid in the

sweepstakes Marx founded to locate the group that is allegedly in the vanguard of history. Laura Reese and Gary Sands (in the journals, *Canadian Public Administration* and *Journal of Urban Affairs*) suggest that no one knows exactly who it is and who is not in the creative class or exactly how this group's presence "relates to economic growth." Therefore, there are likely to be "no effective policy levers," that will produce targeted results.

Reese and Sands provide a nicely tart concluding and summary note that echoes Orwell: "If vague concepts are vaguely understood, then their meaning will always be in doubt... [and] there is little prospect that [they] will provide useful public policy guidance."

Bill Barnes is the director for emerging issues at the National League of Cities (NLC). Comments about his columns, which is reprinted with permission from NLC's Nation's Cities Weekly, and ideas about "emerging issue" topics can be sent to him at barnes@nlc.org. To read previous columns, visit the Emerging Issues webpage at www.nlc.org (in the menu for "About cities.")