

# 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 is in 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 column, 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](mailto:barnes@nlc.org). To read previous columns, visit the Emerging Issues webpage at [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org) (in the menu for “About cities.”)*

## Honest Assessment is Key to Strategic Recovery

From STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT, pg. 11

mission. This often involves managers choosing to take or to blend a pragmatically capitalist approach—determining how much revenue is needed and how to achieve it—with a customer or market-driven approach—and a public service approach. Managing cash flow and time often involves a re-evaluation of cash flow forecasts and improvement opportunities, capital spending, and working capital with the multiple purpose of improving revenue generation, buying more time to accomplish the recovery plan, re-engaging elected officials, government partners and middle management with specific details and deliverables as well as creating stakeholder confidence that things are now under control.

Rebuilding trust through authentic communication involves first defining what is re-

quired to develop/recover trust and how to measure it. There is no international performance standard or definition of trust. It is specific to the organization, its mission and its stakeholders. It starts by managers asking and answering: what's in it for me, the stakeholder? Is it about quality of service, benefits, damages to reputation or costs in terms of time and inconvenience? The next step to rebuilding trust involves assessing and improving the quality and quantity of interactions with each stakeholder and minimizing their perceived risk in participating at some level in the recovery plan.

In my opinion, to be successful in this area will require managers to stand in the shoes of their stakeholders and genuinely understand their current perspectives. It also requires that managers and organizations do not try to cover up problems faced or be something that

they are not. Simply put, a quickly made, sincere apology and acceptance of responsibility goes a long way to re-establishing a base from which to build trust after a crisis.

Strategic recovery from crises requires planning and preparation as well as the consideration of events and impacts that managers, citizens, partners and stakeholders would rather not think about. It requires honest assessments of the causes of the crisis and the five areas of leadership expertise that need to work in order to be better prepared next time. Leading after a crisis is one of the most challenging experiences a public manager can expect to face, but it can also be one of the most rewarding.

*ASPA member Christine Gibbs Springer is principal with Red Tape Limited in Las Vegas, NV, and a former ASPA president. Email: [cggs@aol.com](mailto:cggs@aol.com)*

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# ASPA TIMES

*Advancing excellence in public service. . .*

ASPA members Ari Halachmi and Bill Solomon pose after Halachmi presented Solomon with SECOPA's Distinguished Public Service Practitioner Award during their recent conference in Wilmington, NC.

## 2010 SECOPA Sets Impressive Course

*Kenneth Hunter*

The picturesque riverfront of Wilmington, NC, was the scene for academic and practitioner discussion and collaboration during the 30th Southeastern Conference of Public Administration (SECOPA).

The conference, held at the Wilmington Hilton Riverside, was attended by 326 aca-

demics and practitioners, including 123 current students of public administration.

More than 70 sessions were held where academics and practitioners at the federal, state and local level presented research on topics ranking from finance and human resources, to nonprofit management, environmental policy and comparative theory.

See SECOPA CONFERENCE, pg. 21

## SHARE Publishes New Book

### Section Collaborates with Rutgers-Newark

*Iryna Illiash, Marc Holzer*

*Red Tape from Red Square: Bureaucratic Commentary in Soviet Graphic Satirical Art* is a volume of Russian satirical posters and newspaper cartoons depicting the evils and unintended consequences of bureaucracy. It has been published by the National Center for Public Performance at the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA), Rutgers University-Campus at Newark, in conjunction with the ASPA's Section on Historical, Artistic and Reflective Expression, as an example of the type of work SHARE promotes and is engaged in.

The book, written by the section members and *Public Voices* editors Marc Holzer,

Iryna Illiash, Vatche Gabrielian and Lyudmila Kuznetsova, is the final "chapter" of the section's successful project begun in the early 1990s, with the purchase of several dozens of posters of the "Fighting Pencil" group of graphic artists and poets from Leningrad (St. Petersburg) at the initiative of Marc Holzer. These "Fighting Pencil" posters, and cartoons from the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil*, form the bulk of the collection that is now permanently showcased at the Rutgers-Newark School of Public Affairs and Administration and on SPAA's website at <http://spaa.newark.rutgers.edu/home/publications/exhibitionsart/red-square/about.html>.

See SHARE BOOK, pg. 30

## ASPA Members Appointed by Obama

*From ASPA MEMBERS, pg. 1*

cover the establishment or modification of pay localities, the coverage of salary surveys used to set locality pay, the process for making pay comparisons, and the level of comparability payments that should be made.

Condrey and Facer were appointed as a result of ASPA's expanded policy engagement ef-

forts which also led to a relationship with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and its director, John Berry, to provide advice and counsel. In his announcement, President Obama said, "These impressive individuals bring a wealth of knowledge and tremendous dedication to their new roles. I am confident that they will serve the American people well, and I look forward to working with them in the months and years ahead."

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# SECoPA Hosts Successful Conference in Wilmington, NC

Along with heavy representation from institutions in the southeastern United States, the conference also saw presenters from across the country, as well as visitors from India, Singapore and Turkey.

Traditional sessions were complemented with special offerings featuring Wilmington's new convention center and collaborative visioning process. A pre-conference presentation by the Alliance for Innovation focused on the importance of innovation, partnerships and organizational renewal in the current environment of government fiscal crisis.

Plenary luncheons featured presentation of annual SECoPA awards, along with engaging presentations by Meredith Newman, ASPA president, and the Honorable Carolyn Justice of the North Carolina General Assembly. Newman's presentation focused on the need to improve response capacities in anticipation of potential crisis and disaster, while Representative Justice focused her remarks on the importance of a personal commitment toward ethics for those in public service.

Winners of 2010 SECoPA awards include:

- Donato J. Pugliese Award Professor Ed Jennings, University of Kentucky
- Senator Peter B. Boorsma Award Professor Allan Rosenbaum, Florida International University
- Distinguished Public Service Practitioner Award William E. Solomon, Miami-Dade Parks & Recreation
- Robert Kline Award (Best Master's Student Paper) Meredith Howes, University of Kentucky
- Morris W.H. Collins, Jr. Award (Best Ph.D. Candidate Paper) Winner—Gina Scutelnicu, Florida International University Honorable Mention—Matthew Howell, University of Kentucky

Attendees were impressed with the conference's positive atmosphere, along with the visible work put forth in organizing and hosting the event by the University of North Carolina at Wilmington's MPA Program.

"Tom Barth (UNC-Wilmington) and company are to be congratulated for putting on a

first rate conference," said past SECoPA Chair Steven Condrey. "The annual SECoPA conference is a clear model for other regions to follow in designing a conference that unites the academic and practitioner communities."

As conference chair, Barth declared this year's SECoPA a rousing success. "It was gratifying to see the wonderful mix of faculty, students and practitioners at the SECoPA 2010 Conference."

"I have discovered first-hand what makes the annual conference so special... tremendous cooperation, collegiality and a welcoming atmosphere for many students and practitioners who are presenting for the first time," Barth added. "However, it was also special to see so many leading scholars from the field also in attendance, sharing their insights and offering suggestions. Thank you to all the SECoPA 2010 participants!"

During the final evening reception, attendees learned about plans for the 2011 SECoPA, scheduled for September 21st-24th in New Orleans. A raffle and silent

auction were also held, raising \$1,370 for the SECoPA Endowment Fund.

"Once again, I left a SECoPA Conference energized about the many panels I attended and proud to be a part of an organization that takes its work seriously," said incoming SECoPA Chair, Dorothy Norris-Tirrell.

To learn more about SECoPA, visit their website, [www.aspaonline.org/secopa](http://www.aspaonline.org/secopa).

*ASPA Member Kenneth Hunter is the budget & evaluation manager for the City of Rocky Mount, NC, and serves on the Executive Committee of the Association for Budgeting & Financial Management and is a Board Member and Webmaster for the North Carolina Local Government Budget Association. Email: [kenneth.hunter@rockymountnc.gov](mailto:kenneth.hunter@rockymountnc.gov)*

## Call for Papers

### Accountability and Organizational learning

We are inviting papers that use either qualitative or quantitative approaches for contributing to the study of "Accountability and Organizational Learning."

Please submit a brief abstract of the proposed contribution to [ahalachmi@hotmail.com](mailto:ahalachmi@hotmail.com) or [dorothea.greiling@jku.at](mailto:dorothea.greiling@jku.at) by **January 20, 2011**, for the initial selection. You would be notified by January 31st if your paper is invited. An advance draft of the paper (20 pages or so) which complies with the style of *Public Performance and Management Review* (PPMR) is expected to be received by May 1, 2011. Following a blind peer review (and any needed revisions and subsequent reviews) the final drafts of the accepted papers would be due by August 30, 2011. The symposium would be published by PPMR in 2012.

## SPAR Best Book Award

### Nominations Sought

The American Society for Public Administration's Section on Public Administration Research (SPAR) is seeking nominations for its annual book award for public administration scholarship. Evaluative criteria include outstanding accomplishment of the research objectives, high-quality writing, and potential to constitute a lasting contribution to the public administration literature.

Books with copyright dates in either 2009 or 2010 are eligible. The book's orientation may be quantitative, empirical, interpretive, ethnographic, historical, archival, normative or theoretical. Textbooks and edited volumes are not eligible. A maximum of two book nominees will be considered from any single publisher.

The winner of the award will receive a plaque, a small honorarium, and notice published in the American Review of Public Administration. The award will be presented at the SPAR section meeting in Baltimore at the 2011 ASPA conference.

*Nominations, including a short justification relative to the above criteria, should be made via e-mail to: [Stuart Bretschneider, Ph.D.](mailto:Stuart.Bretschneider@maxwell.syr.edu), Associate Dean and Chair, Department of Public Administration, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244 email: [sibretsc@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:sibretsc@maxwell.syr.edu)*

Deadline for receipt of copies of nominated books is January 10, 2011, but earlier submissions are encouraged. Publishers are encouraged to send a copy of each nominated book to Professor Bretschneider (listed above), and to the committee members listed below.

Domonic A. Bearfield, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
The Bush School of Government and Public Service  
Texas A&M University  
4220 TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843-4220  
[dbearfield@bushschool.tamu.edu](mailto:dbearfield@bushschool.tamu.edu)

Louise K. Comfort, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs  
University of Pittsburgh  
3930 Wesley W. Posvar Hall  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260  
[lkc@pitt.edu](mailto:lkc@pitt.edu)

## ASPA Contributors

### Supporting Contributors

Lewis D. Fisher  
*Ocean, NJ*

Frederick S. Lane  
*East Sandwich, MA*

Robert F. Abbey, Jr.  
*Bowie, MD*

Wendy A. Haynes  
*Pocasset, MA*

Jean Hays Peretz  
*Knoxville, TN*

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Cliff Lippard  
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Fred Palm  
*New York, NY*

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*Poughkeepsie, NY*

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*Missouri City, TX*

Sheldon Edner  
*Fredericksburg, VA*

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*Austin, TX*

### Individual Contributors

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*Center Valley, PA*

Eva Johnson  
*Murrieta, CA*