House of Commons

Public Administration Select Committee

Bad Language: The Use and Abuse of Official Language

First Report of Session 2009–10

Report, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 19 November 2009*

The Public Administration Select Committee

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

Current membership

Dr Tony Wright MP (*Labour, Cannock Chase*) (*Chairman*)
Mr David Burrowes MP (*Conservative, Enfield Southgate*)
Paul Flynn MP (*Labour, Newport West*)
David Heyes MP (*Labour, Ashton under Lyne*)
Kelvin Hopkins MP (*Labour, Luton North*)
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger MP (*Conservative, Bridgwater*)
Julie Morgan MP (*Labour, Cardiff North*)
Mr Gordon Prentice MP (*Labour, Pendle*)
Paul Rowen MP (*Liberal Democrats, Rochdale*)
Mr Charles Walker MP (*Conservative, Broxbourne*)
Jenny Willott MP (*Liberal Democrats, Cardiff Central*)

Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 146. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at http://www.parliament.uk/pasc

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Steven Mark (Clerk), David Slater (Second Clerk), Pauline Ngan (Committee Specialist), Louise Glen (Senior Committee Assistant), Lori Verwaerde (Committee Assistant)

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Public Administration Select Committee, Committee Office, First Floor, 7 Millbank, House of Commons, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5730; the Committee's email address is pasc@parliament.uk

Contents

Summary

Politics and government are public activities, and so politicians and public servants should use language that people find clear, accurate and understandable. We undertook this inquiry because we were concerned that too often official language distorts or confuses meaning. This is damaging because it can prevent public understanding of policies and their consequences, and can also deter people from getting access to public services and benefits.

We conclude that bad official language which results in tangible harm—such as preventing someone from receiving the benefits or services to which they are entitled—should be regarded as "maladministration". People should feel able to complain about cases of confusing or misleading language, as they would for any other type of poor administration. Equally, government and public sector bodies need to respond properly to complaints about bad official language; and if they do not, people should be encouraged to take their complaints to the relevant Ombudsman.

Bad official language deserves to be mocked, but it also needs to be taken seriously. We hope that our conclusions and suggestions will encourage government to mind its language in future.

1 Introduction

> This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.
>
> — George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"[1]

1. The language used in public life is a frequent target for ridicule, whether by parliamentary sketchwriters making fun of ministers' speeches, or in fictional works such as the television series *Yes Minister*. Yet the language used by government and public bodies is important because it directly affects people's lives. It needs to enable those in government (and those who want to be in government) to explain clearly what the basis for a policy is, or to provide guidance on getting access to the range of public services. Language therefore determines how politicians and public servants relate to the people they are there to serve.

2. We launched our short inquiry into official language to highlight the importance of clear and understandable language in government. In order to evaluate how effectively government uses language, we invited the public and Members of Parliament to submit examples of bad and good official language. Many of these are included in this report to illustrate how government uses (and misuses) language. We also held a public hearing to ask questions of the Plain English Campaign, the academic expert Professor David Crystal, and the political sketchwriters and columnists Matthew Parris and Simon Hoggart.

3. The aim of our inquiry was not merely to highlight the worst examples of official language (although such examples have been by turns amusing and exasperating), but to explore why the language used by government matters. We examine the damaging effects that bad official language can have, before concluding on a more hopeful note with some suggestions for making official language clearer and more comprehensible, including a proposed remedy for citizens.

---

1   George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", 1946

2 Bad official language

4. Politics and government are public activities, and so the language used by politicians and officials should be honest, accessible and understandable. Yet official language is often criticised for being the opposite. Groups such as the Plain English Campaign and the Local Government Association have drawn attention to the variety of baffling terms used in government; and the LGA publishes an annual list of banned words, the most recent one including such examples as "place shaping", "re-baselining" and "holistic governance".[2] Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP, now the Minister for the Cabinet Office, said in 2004 that she kept a "little book of bollocks" containing instances of government jargon and gobbledegook:

> I have what I call a bollocks list where I just sit in meetings and I write down some of the absurd language we use—and we are all guilty of this, myself included. The risk is when you have been in government for eight years you begin to talk the language which is not the language of the real world.[3]

5. The unlovely language of this unreal world floats along on a linguistic sea of roll-outs, step changes, public domains, fit for purposes, stakeholder engagements, across the pieces, win-wins, level playing fields and going forwards. Michael Gove MP has written that:

> Since becoming a Member of Parliament I've been learning a new language…No one ever uses a simple Anglo-Saxon word, or a concrete example, where a Latinate construction or a next-to-meaningless abstraction can be found.[4]

6. We distinguish between two main types of official language in this report. What we call "political language" is, as the name suggests, often (but not exclusively) used by politicians in explaining and defending their policies. "Administrative language", meanwhile, is typically used by officials and administrators in their dealings with the public. In this chapter, we outline some of the varieties of specifically *bad* official language that can be found in government, in both political and administrative contexts, and the damaging consequences that can result.

7. This is not to suggest that all official language is bad. Indeed, the Plain English Campaign has found that it is the financial and legal professions, rather than government, that cause the most concern through their use of confusing language.[5] Much academic language, especially in the social sciences, is notoriously impenetrable. Nevertheless, our public call for examples of good and bad official language elicited no examples of good language, but plenty of examples of bad language.

8. We now explore some of the damaging consequences that bad official language can have. We consider first the way in which bad political language can inhibit both public

---

2   "LGA urges the public sector to ditch jargon to help people during the recession", Local Government Association press release, 18 March 2009

3   "From Newspeak to plain-speaking: Jowell aims to cut out the jargon", *Financial Times*, 23 December 2004, p 1

4   "Warning: speaking Quango drives you to tears", *Times*, 8 December 2008, p 22

5   See http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/faqs.html; see also Q 31

understanding of policy and original thought; and then examine the harm that bad administrative language can cause to the public.

Political language: distorting or disguising meaning

9. George Orwell wrote that political language was "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind".[6] Several types of language used by politicians and civil servants match this description (if not quite to the extent depicted by Orwell). Political spin and obfuscating language are used to disguise what may be politically embarrassing activities or unpalatable truths. Politicians have also been known to use grandiloquently opaque language to give the impression that they have something important to say, when in fact they do not.

10. The first of Orwell's linguistic dislikes, distorting or evasive language, is routinely practised by both politicians and civil servants. It can be seen in the use of euphemisms—referring to "downsizing", "realignment of resources" or "efficiency savings", for example, rather than talking about budget or staff cuts. Silky language can be used to obscure meaning, along the lines of *Yes Minister*'s Sir Humphrey Appleby. Simon Hoggart described an attempt by the then Cabinet Secretary Sir Richard Wilson[7] to use emollient language to play down the row about government spin and special advisers that erupted at the former Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions in 2001:

> For instance, when talking about the Jo Moore, Stephen Byers and Martin Sixsmith imbroglio, Sir Richard said: "The evidence must be that this discontentment built up and this behaviour was such as could not go on." In English, this would be translated as: "People were being quite outrageous and had to stop." Or: "There are issues about the framework which quite legitimately need to be addressed."…this means "some of these guys were right out of control and there was nothing to stop them."…"It would be wrong to impose on that morning more order than it had." (This means: "It was chaotic beyond belief.")[8]

11. In his remarks to us, former Cabinet minister Rt Hon David Blunkett MP likewise noted a tendency among civil servants to use language that disguised rather than revealed their true intent:

> The civil service always use the term "delighted" for just about anything that ministers are asked to do—which completely takes away any meaning for the word at all! I used to eliminate it from all my letters and reports. They also have wonderful phrases like "stand ready" which actually means we're doing nothing about this unless we're absolutely forced to do so![9]

12. The use of professional jargon or technical language out of context can often lead to misunderstanding and confusion. In itself, jargon is no bad thing: defenders say that it acts as necessary professional shorthand, used to convey complicated ideas succinctly. It can

---

6   Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

7   Now Lord Wilson of Dinton

8   "Best of British from the grandee's grandee", *Guardian*, 15 March 2002, p 2

9   Ev 13

also help develop group bonds among staff in an organisation or profession. The problem comes when jargon is used out of place, especially when dealing with the wider public, as David Crystal told us:

> Every group has its jargon. There is no group on this earth that does not have a jargon. It is when that jargon becomes opaque to the outsider, when the people say, "It is not just enough for us to talk to each other, we have to talk to the outside world" and they forget the demands of the audience, that it gets tricky.[10]

13. Jargon or pseudo-technical language can be used by politicians and others to dress up an otherwise simple idea, or to hide the fact that the speaker or writer doesn't really understand what they are writing or talking about.[11] Sterile jargon is the enemy of clear thought. This is often the case when it comes to terms that originate from the world of business (especially from management consultancy), which have increasingly intruded themselves into government. We received several examples during the course of our inquiry, including the following.

Letter from the Minister of State for Care Services to Roger Gale MP:

> Pacesetters aims to tackle inequalities in health services and in the workplace arising out of discrimination and disadvantage. The programme is founded on a robust evidence base and evaluation strategy. Its projects are developed through co-design with communities and delivered through a service improvement methodology...We anticipate that most interventions worked on will be for a period of one year—after which successful innovations will be mainstreamed into the work of the trusts and spread nationally. This will ensure long-term sustainability of equality and diversity into core business.[12]

House of Commons business plan for 2008/09:

> FY 2008/09: objectives:…To ensure a risk management system is embedded within business processes, allowing for risks to be escalated up and down the organisation as necessary.[13]

Cabinet Office annual report and accounts, 2008–2009:

> Savings on the core grant-in-aid delivering the Change-Up programme, against the counterfactual of an inflationary increase and re-prioritisation of the OTS budget to fund a wider range of investment programmes from the 2007–08 baseline amount to around £4.8m realised in 2008–09. Capacitybuilders is now delivering further third sector funding streams in order to rationalise delivery and to take advantage of existing funding mechanisms.[14]

---

10   Q 3

11   See Christopher Jary, *Working with Ministers*, 4th edition (National School of Government, 2008), p 65

12   Ev 18

13   Ev 16

14   Cabinet Office, *Annual Report and Accounts 2008–2009*, HC 442, July 2009, p 85

14. Phil Willis MP, Chair of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee,[15] wrote to us of his Committee's attempt to get the Department's then Permanent Secretary, Ian Watmore, to make sense of such "management speak":

> During the evidence session with officials in DIUS we selected at random and read the following extract from the *Departmental Report* to Mr Watmore:
>
> > An overarching national improvement strategy will drive up quality and performance underpinned by specific plans for strategically significant areas of activity, such as workforce and technology. The capital investment strategy will continue to renew and modernise further education establishments to create state of the art facilities.
>
> Mr Watmore was unable to explain the meaning of the passage. He conceded that "documents written by people in senior positions can often be very inaccessible to the public" and he undertook that for next year DIUS would "get the plain English people in earlier".[16]

15. Sometimes those dealing with government, such as pressure groups and special interest groups, make their own contribution to the degradation of language and meaning. Michael Gove MP has given this example of a briefing note received from one such group on the contents of a Queen's Speech:

> The onion model set out the Government's vision of what was needed to achieve whole system change. There is an urgent need for still greater integration at every layer of the onion in frontline delivery, processes, strategy and governance. At the level of service delivery in particular there remain significant practical, philosophical and resource barriers to full integration. Further legislative changes at governance level alone will not automatically make it easier to address these barriers.[17]

16. One of the reasons why bad language of this kind matters is that it can prevent people from understanding the implications of policies. Will Cooper sent us examples of language associated with the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme, which he argued were so ridden with jargon that they hindered public understanding. One example was a Treasury press release that started with this sentence:

> A platform for generating increased Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deal flow and reducing the costs of tendering will be the outcome of new contract guidelines published by the Treasury Taskforce, Chief Secretary to the Treasury Alan Milburn said today.[18]

17. While openly admitting a personal bias against the use of PFI, Mr Cooper went on to make this point about the language connected with it:

---

15   Now the Science and Technology Committee

16   Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, Third Report of Session 2008–09, *DIUS's Departmental Report 2008*, HC 51–I, para 7

17   "Warning: speaking Quango drives you to tears", *Times*, 8 December 2008, p 22

18   Ev 14

> I understand that the subject [of PFI] is a complex one that requires its own internal lingo, but I feel strongly that the public simply don't know what it is, let alone understand the political principles underlying it, largely because the language used to describe its workings is so eye-wateringly arcane. I would even venture to suggest that this may be one of the prime objectives of PFI: some of the terminology is purposefully euphemistic, the upshot being that the public have neither the confidence nor the understanding to question its mechanics or its prevalence.[19]

18. Attempts to use language to disguise or distort meaning can feed growing public mistrust of government. Terms such as "extraordinary rendition" and "collateral damage", for instance, have become so well-known that they no longer serve as euphemisms;[20] but the attempt to use such terms to hide unpleasant realities can fuel cynicism about government.

19. Another damaging effect of bad official language, perhaps less deliberate but no less dangerous, results from the use of stock phrases and terms to substitute for original expression and thought. Simon Hoggart described how such terms can fit together neatly, even if they signify little:

> The analogy I would give is that it is a bit like a small child playing with Lego. Each brick in itself is fine. Even phrases like "coterminous stakeholder engagement" have a meaning—it means talking to the people who are affected all the time—but you compress that into a little brick (of three words), you add another brick, and then you put on another brick, and your child suddenly—and we have all seen children do this—suddenly produces something that is not anything at all, it is just a lot of Lego, and it all hangs together but it is absolutely meaningless and has no purpose or function whatsoever.[21]

20. George Orwell made the same point some fifty years earlier about language that is put together without any apparent reference to thought or meaning. Decrying the use of "ready-made" phrases that stifle original thought and encourage political conformity, he wrote that:

> They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connexion between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.[22]

21. **The language used in politics and government matters because politics is a *public* activity and the services that government provides are *public* services. The public nature of government and its activities means that politicians and public servants should be required to communicate with people in a straightforward way, using language that people understand. We have encountered numerous examples of official language, however, where meaning has been confused and distorted. Bad language of this kind is**

---

19   Ev 13

20   Q 19

21   Q 8

22   Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

damaging because it can both prevent public understanding of policies and inhibit original expression and thought.

Administrative language: alienating the public

22. Good communication is essential when it involves members of the public trying to deal with the state, such as to pay taxes, apply for benefits or get public services. Yet large parts of the public sector still appear to have some way to go in improving their communications with the public. "Officialese" in administrative language can sometimes have amusing results, as the following extract of a letter from HM Revenue and Customs demonstrates (which, deservedly, won a "Golden Bull" award from the Plain English Campaign):

> Thank you for your Tax Returns ended 5th April 2006 & 2007 which we received on 20th December. I will treat your Tax Return for all purposes as though you sent it in response to a notice from us which required you to deliver it to us by the day we received it.[23]

23. More often, however, confusing or incomprehensible language simply makes dealing with officialdom more complicated than it needs to be. Marie Clair of the Plain English Campaign explained that in her experience the main challenge was getting government bodies to use less confusing bureaucratic language:

> …the problem is simply that there are people out there in real-life situations who are suffering because they do not understand the language. That is what the [Plain English Campaign] is concerned about. Those are the things I receive in my inbox on a daily basis and a lot of those are still about government documents…we simply want to see people having a better chance at understanding and using the public information that is available to them in whatever form.[24]

24. The perpetrators of this variety of official language often fail to consider adequately who they are writing for. Examples of this sort of language are often found in official letters and forms, and can come across as unsympathetic or overly officious. Andrew George MP provided a letter from the Information Commissioner's Office which, as he noted, illustrates how formulaic letter construction can alienate and confuse the reader:

> Thank you for your correspondence dated 12 December 2008 in which you complain about the response you received from MOJ.
>
> So we can progress your complaint we need you to provide copies of the following:
>
> - Your initial request for information to MOJ
>
> **Your case has now been closed** as there is no further action we are able to take without the documents we have requested. We require these documents as:
>
> - It provides us with a full set of unedited evidence in support of the complaint

---

23   See http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/golden_bull_awards/2008_golden_bull_winners.html

24   Q 30

- It is necessary to provide a copy of the initial request to the public authority when we first notify them of having received a complaint

Once we receive the information we have requested your complaint can be reopened.[25]

25. The Work and Pensions Committee heard of similar examples of unsympathetic official communications during its inquiry into benefits simplification:

> I saw one just recently: an 81-year-old woman who received a five-page letter about Pension Credit weeks after the death of her husband. It had about 50 different sums of money in the statement and was just completely untransparent, even to a CAB adviser. I doubt whether a pension credit expert would have fully understood it, yet letters like that are going out without being seen by anyone. [John Wheatley, Citizens Advice]

> I saw a letter the other week asking the claimant for a medical certificate and it was four pages long…A four page letter to ask for a medical certificate is not helpful. [Sue Royston, Citizens Advice][26]

26. The National Audit Office (NAO) agrees with this line of criticism, concluding that departments and agencies need to be more realistic about how people read and complete forms rather than making assumptions about how citizens should behave.[27] NAO studies have found that lengthy or complex forms can discourage people from applying for benefits and thereby leave needy people out of pocket. An investigation into pensioner poverty found that "difficulty in completing forms" was a major reason why pensioners do not apply for benefits available to them.[28] In the case of one specific benefit, Attendance Allowance (for older people requiring personal care due to disability), the NAO attributed a lower than desired take-up in part to basic confusion over the name of the benefit itself: "Our focus groups showed that the name is widely misconstrued by older people as requiring attendance by the applicant at an old people's centre".[29]

27. **Poor communication by government bodies dealing with the public is a significant concern, especially when large numbers of people are affected. Long, complex official forms, officious letters and confusing requests for information can all deter individuals from attempting to deal with public authorities. This is particularly worrying when it prevents people from getting the benefits or services to which they are entitled.**

---

25   Ev 20

26   Work and Pensions Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2006–07, *Benefits Simplification*, HC 463–I, para 249

27   National Audit Office, *Difficult Forms: How Government Agencies Interact with Citizens*, Session 2002–03, HC 1145, 31 October 2003, p 9

28   National Audit Office, *Tackling Pensioner Poverty: Encouraging Take-up of Entitlements*, Session 2002–03, HC 37, 20 November 2002, p 25

29   National Audit Office, *Communicating with Customers*, Session 2008–09, HC 421, 7 May 2009, p 31

3 Making official language clearer

28. The examples included in this report indicate that the language used by many in government could be much clearer than it is. As the former Permanent Secretary Ian Watmore said: "I doubt that any document resident in Whitehall would totally pass the plain English test".[30] In fact, government is probably not the worst offender when it comes to the misuse of language. Nonetheless, given the intrinsically public nature of government communications, it is important to encourage efforts to make official language as clear as possible. We now consider what might be done to improve both political and administrative language.

Political language: mockery and models

29. Political language will not be changed through legislation or by command. In contrast to administrative language, political language puts greater emphasis on using language to *persuade* rather than simply to explain. This characteristic makes it difficult to establish useful models of linguistic clarity in advance; it is easier to identify bad political language after the fact than to set out in advance how to formulate good political language. George Orwell's attempt to prescribe rules for effective language usage in his "Politics and the English Language" essay came under fire from David Crystal:

> If you asked Orwell, "How exactly are you proposing to do this?" then you got an awful lot of waffle by way of reply. Orwell was very opaque when he was pressed on this point, and in the end he came down to suggesting half a dozen what he thought were solutions to the problem. One of them, I recall, was: Never use a passive when an active will do, but when you analyse Orwell's language you find he uses passives all the time. It is easy to think up some simple solutions and say, "We must always do this," but actually language is usually more complicated than any person like Orwell has so far suggested.[31]

Orwell's checklist of language rules might be too prescriptive, but elsewhere he does suggest one rule of thumb that is excellent advice for those crafting political (and other types of) language: "What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about".[32]

30. Matthew Parris took a different tack by suggesting that the best way to deal with bad political language was to make fun of it:

---

30   Oral evidence taken before the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee on 13 October 2008, Third Report of Session 2008–09, *DIUS's Departmental Report 2008*, HC 51–II, Q 25

31   Q 11

32   Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

…I think mockery is very important. If we just keep up a constant barrage of mockery so that the culprits begin to realise that it is not clever and that it is not getting them anywhere, we will achieve something.[33]

31. The mockery tactic is used effectively by political sketchwriters and journalists, who perform a public service by skewering the most egregious linguistic excesses. As well as mocking bad political language, however, David Crystal thought *good* language should be encouraged and celebrated:

Every now and then I guess most of you will encounter somebody saying something or writing something, and everybody saying, "That was good". We have talked about Churchill, we have talked about Barack Obama, and there will be local examples, where you say, "That was good". What happens to that piece of good English? It is just part of Hansard now and maybe it might get into the press. As you say, it might get the occasional mention, but then it is forgotten forever. Why should there not be a little archive of good practice built up in some way which is party neutral, when people say these are good examples of not necessarily plain English but effective English in the context in which the language is going to be used?[34]

32. **Mockery, as practised by sketchwriters and other political observers, serves a useful purpose by reducing our tolerance for the misuse of language. More generally, "good" political language should be encouraged, and the use of language that distorts or disguises meaning should be exposed and condemned.**

Administrative language: improving clarity

33. The benefits of improving administrative language go beyond merely getting rid of irritating phrases and buzzwords. Good government, as we have concluded in numerous past reports, involves being responsive to the public.[35] Making the language used by government clearer and more accessible should therefore help people to feel that government does understand, and is able to respond to, their needs. As the Parliamentary Ombudsman has stated in her *Principles of Good Administration*: "Public bodies should communicate effectively, using clear language that people can understand and that is appropriate to them and their circumstances".[36]

34. Making official information and forms more understandable would also have benefits for government, by increasing the likelihood that people would comply with requests for accurate information. In some cases, there are significant financial implications involved: HM Revenue and Customs estimates that unintentional errors made by taxpayers when completing their self-assessment forms result in around £300 million in underpaid tax each year (although it makes no estimate of the extent of errors leading to overpaid tax).[37]

---

33   Q 11

34   Q 46

35   See, for example, Public Administration Select Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2007–08, *User Involvement in Public Services*, HC 410; Eighth Report of Session 2008–09, *Good Government*, HC 97–I, paras 41, 64

36   Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, *Principles of Good Administration*, February 2009

37   National Audit Office, *Helping Individuals Understand and Complete Their Tax Forms*, Session 2006–07, HC 452, 27 April 2007, p 6

Clearer and more user-friendly forms also mean government bodies can avoid the cost and inconvenience of having to go back to people if information provided is incomplete, a point made by the University of Reading's Simplification Centre:

> ...error-prone forms have to be returned and corrected, and needless enquiries are made to government helplines. These costs are rarely addressed in reviews of potential savings, but we believe they are considerable.[38]

35. There are many sources of help for government departments seeking to improve the language skills of their staff. The National School of Government works with government departments to promote clearer communication, as do organisations such as the Plain English Campaign and the Plain Language Commission. Government bodies have also produced their own staff guidance on language use; good examples include the Charity Commission's "Stop, Think, Write" guidelines[39] and the Office for Disability Issues' guidance on "The Importance of Accessible Information".[40] Both publications emphasise the need to be sensitive to the intended audience's needs, and to tailor language accordingly. As David Crystal suggested, encouraging good language use through sharing guidance on good communication and model examples is as important as highlighting cases of bad language.[41]

36. The NAO has monitored the accessibility of government forms and information over the years, especially for government departments that have many dealings with the public such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue and Customs.[42] Its most recent report on how well DWP communicates with its "customers" concluded that the Department had managed to improve its communications, particularly in making forms easier to use and providing more readily accessible information.[43] The Plain English Campaign echoed this conclusion, saying that parts of government had succeeded in making administrative communications clearer and easier to understand.[44] Both the NAO and the Plain English Campaign do, however, note that government bodies need to maintain efforts to improve how they communicate with the public, including by regularly reviewing forms and leaflets and redrafting those that are too long or complex.[45]

Bad language as maladministration

37. At present, there is no obvious mechanism for people themselves to highlight cases of bad official language. We believe this is a gap that needs to be filled. One way of doing so

---

38 Ev 23

39 Charity Commission, *Stop, Think, Write: A Guide to Communication and Writing*, July 2007

40 Office for Disability Issues, *The Importance of Accessible Information: An Introduction for Senior Civil Servants*, November 2008

41 Q 46

42 See, for example, National Audit Office reports cited previously on *Difficult Forms*, *Communicating with Customers* and *Helping Individuals Understand and Complete Their Tax Forms*; and also *Using Leaflets to Communicate with the Public about Services and Entitlements*, Session 2005–06, HC 797, 25 January 2006

43 National Audit Office, *Communicating with Customers*, p 5

44 Q 31; see also http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/about_the_awards/

45 National Audit Office, *Difficult Forms*, p 8; *Using Leaflets to Communicate with the Public about Services and Entitlements*, pp 10–11; see also Qq 30, 53

would be to encourage people to complain about serious cases of bad official language directly to the body concerned; and if that fails, to the relevant Ombudsman (e.g. the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, or the Local Government Ombudsman).

38. In our view, using confusing or unclear language that is so bad that it results in people not getting the benefits or services to which they are entitled, or which prevents them from understanding their rights or the choices available to them, amounts to "maladaministration". This would provide the grounds for making a complaint to the relevant Ombudsman if the public authority involved does not take adequate steps to rectify its poor communication. The Parliamentary Ombudsman agreed with this view. She told us that she could envisage circumstances in which the poor use of language could be considered maladministration,[46] and further observed that:

> I think if it got to the point that it was actually incomprehensible, then it would be in contravention of my principles about providing information that's clear, accurate and not misleading.[47]

39. **We believe that the use of inaccurate, confusing or misleading official language which results in tangible harm, such as preventing individuals from receiving benefits or public services, should be regarded as maladministration. People should be encouraged to complain about cases of bad official language directly to the body concerned, and government needs to take such complaints of maladministration seriously. Failure to do so would provide grounds for people to complain to the relevant Ombudsman about poor official language.**

Legislative language: making it plain

40. One variety of official language that has received attention over the years is the language used in drafting legislation. In 1975, Sir David (subsequently Lord) Renton's official report on *The Preparation of Legislation* considered the language of legislative drafting as part of its wider examination of the legislative process. The report highlighted examples of convoluted drafting in statutes, observing that: "the legislative output of Parliament is often incomprehensible even to those who are most familiar with the subject matter of the legislation".[48] Some twenty years on, the Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons took up several of the concerns of the Renton report and successfully recommended that bills be accompanied (and demystified) by readily understandable explanatory notes.[49] Explanatory notes are now an established mechanism for making the meaning of legislation clearer to a non-specialist audience. There have been other innovations to improve the accessibility of legislation: the Mental Incapacity Bill (now the

46   Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence taken before the Public Administration Select Committee on 5 November 2009, Session 2008–09, HC 1079–i, Q 29

47   *Ibid*, Q 28

48   Sir David Renton, *The Preparation of Legislation*, Cmnd 6053, May 1975, p 27

49   Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, First Report of Session 1997–98, *The Legislative Process*, HC 190, paras 36–37

Mental Capacity Act 2005) was published with a guide in easy read format to make it accessible to people with learning difficulties.[50]

41. Less successfully, the Modernisation Committee also urged that "legislation should, so far as possible, be readily understandable and in plain English".[51] That Committee did acknowledge in 2006 that some progress had been made in making the language of bills more comprehensible.[52] Yet there is still the occasional example of confusing and arcane legislative language, as this extract from the (now-repealed) Regulatory Reform Act 2001, attempting to explain the Act's purpose, illustrates:

> …to enable provision to be made for the purpose of reforming legislation which has the effect of imposing burdens affecting persons in the carrying on of any activity and to enable codes of practice to be made with respect to the enforcement of restrictions, requirements or conditions.[53]

42. One of the most significant plain language projects in British government is the tax law rewrite project started in 1995. The aim of this project is to rewrite the UK's primary direct taxation statutes in order to make the legislation clearer and easier to use, without changing the law. It has resulted in several acts being revised, the most recent revision being the Corporation Tax Act 2009. The Government set out the benefits of the project as follows:

> Rewriting the legislation involves unpacking dense wording, replacing archaic expressions with more modern ones, splitting provisions into more sections and subsections, grouping related issues together, improving layout and introducing various aids to navigation. Inevitably, this results in legislation that is significantly longer but legislation that is much clearer and easier to use. The changes introduced by the project have already resulted in tangible benefits to users, including administrative savings from the rewrite of income tax estimated at £70 million a year. Further savings of around £25 million a year are predicted from the rewrite of corporation tax.[54]

43. Other countries have gone further. As well as revising tax law, as the UK has done, both Australia and Canada have reviewed and rewritten other types of legislation, including legislation on explosives, employment insurance, off-shore mining and care for older people.[55] Canada has also been a pioneer at drafting laws in plain language; Alberta's Financial Services Act 1990, for instance, was written in plain language (in addition to imposing a duty to use plain language in some financial documents).[56]

---

50   Department for Constitutional Affairs, *A Guide to the Draft Mental Incapacity Bill: What Does It Mean for Me?*, June 2003

51   Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, First Report of Session 1997–98, *The Legislative Process*, HC 190, para 14

52   Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, First Report of Session 2005–06, *The Legislative Process*, HC 1097, para 36

53   Regulatory Reform Act 2001 (now repealed); see also Ev 15

54   HM Revenue and Customs, *Tax Law Rewrite Report and Plans 2008–09*, 2008

55   Michèle M Asprey, *Plain Language for Lawyers*, 3rd edition (Federation Press, Sydney, 2003), chapter 4

56   Government of Alberta, Financial Consumers Act 1990

44. **Making legislative language clearer and simpler needs to be balanced against the interests of ensuring that legislation is as precise and certain in its meaning as necessary. Supporting material such as explanatory notes can help make legislation more accessible to the non-specialist reader. Government could, however, explore to a greater extent initiatives to make the statute book clearer and more readily understandable, such as rewriting existing legislation (along the lines of the successful tax law rewrite project) and giving serious consideration, on a case by case basis, to drafting laws in clearer, simpler language.**

4 Conclusion

45. The language of government, politics and administration matters. The public sphere demands a public language that conveys meaning. Any language that obscures, confuses or evades does not fulfil its public purpose. Too often this is the case, as we have shown in this report. Nor is this a trivial matter. Good government requires good language; while bad language is a sign of poor government. By drawing attention to this issue, and suggesting some ways to improve matters, we hope to encourage the good to drive out the bad.

Conclusions and recommendations

1.   The language used in politics and government matters because politics is a public activity and the services that government provides are public services. The public nature of government and its activities means that politicians and public servants should be required to communicate with people in a straightforward way, using language that people understand. We have encountered numerous examples of official language, however, where meaning has been confused and distorted. Bad language of this kind is damaging because it can both prevent public understanding of policies and inhibit original expression and thought. (Paragraph 21)

2.   Poor communication by government bodies dealing with the public is a significant concern, especially when large numbers of people are affected. Long, complex official forms, officious letters and confusing requests for information can all deter individuals from attempting to deal with public authorities. This is particularly worrying when it prevents people from getting the benefits or services to which they are entitled. (Paragraph 27)

3.   Mockery, as practised by sketchwriters and other political observers, serves a useful purpose by reducing our tolerance for the misuse of language. More generally, "good" political language should be encouraged, and the use of language that distorts or disguises meaning should be exposed and condemned. (Paragraph 32)

4.   We believe that the use of inaccurate, confusing or misleading official language which results in tangible harm, such as preventing individuals from receiving benefits or public services, should be regarded as maladministration. People should be encouraged to complain about cases of bad official language directly to the body concerned, and government needs to take such complaints of maladministration seriously. Failure to do so would provide grounds for people to complain to the relevant Ombudsman about poor official language. (Paragraph 39)

5.   Making legislative language clearer and simpler needs to be balanced against the interests of ensuring that legislation is as precise and certain in its meaning as necessary. Supporting material such as explanatory notes can help make legislation more accessible to the non-specialist reader. Government could, however, explore to a greater extent initiatives to make the statute book clearer and more readily understandable, such as rewriting existing legislation (along the lines of the successful tax law rewrite project) and giving serious consideration, on a case by case basis, to drafting laws in clearer, simpler language. (Paragraph 44)

Formal Minutes

Thursday 19 November 2009

Members present:

Dr Tony Wright, in the Chair

David Heyes   Paul Rowen
Kelvin Hopkins   Mr Charles Walker
Mr Gordon Prentice

Draft Report (*Bad Language: The Use and Abuse of Official Language*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 45 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Written evidence reported and ordered to be published on 9 July was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

[Adjourned till Thursday 26 November at 9.45 am

Witnesses

List of written evidence

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2008-09

First Report	Lobbying: Access and influence in Whitehall	HC 36 *(HC 1058)*
Second Report	Justice delayed: The Ombudsman's Report on Equitable Life	HC 41 *(HC 953)*
Third Report	Ethics and Standards: Further Report	HC 43 *(HC 332)*
Fourth Report	Work of the Committee in 2007-08	HC 42
Fifth Report	Response to White Paper: "An Elected Second Chamber"	HC 137
Sixth Report	Justice denied? The Government response to the Ombudsman's report on Equitable Life	HC 219 *(HC 569)*
Seventh Report	Further Report on Machinery of Government Changes	HC 540
Eight Report	Good Government	HC 97 *(HC 1045)*
Ninth Report	The Iraq Inquiry	HC 721 *(HC 992)*
Tenth Report	Leaks and Whistleblowing in Whitehall	HC 83

Session 2007–08

First Report	Machinery of Government Changes: A follow-up Report	HC 160 *(HC 514)*
Second Report	Propriety and Peerages	HC 153 *(Cm 7374)*
Third Report	Parliament and public appointments: Pre-appointment hearings by select committees	HC 152 *(HC 515)*
Fourth Report	Work of the Committee in 2007	HC 236 *(HC 458)*
Fifth Report	When Citizens Complain	HC 409 *(HC 997)*
Sixth Report	User Involvement in Public Services	HC 410 *(HC 998)*
Seventh Report	Investigating the Conduct of Ministers	HC 381 *(HC 1056)*
Eighth Report	Machinery of Government Changes: Further Report	HC 514 *(HC 540, Session 2008–09)*
Ninth Report	Parliamentary Commissions of Inquiry	HC 473 *(HC 1060)*
Tenth Report	Constitutional Renewal: Draft Bill and White Paper	HC 499 *(Cm 7688)*
Eleventh Report	Public Services and the Third Sector: Rhetoric and Reality	HC 112 *(HC 1209)*
Twelfth Report	From Citizen's Charter to Public Service Guarantees: Entitlement to Public Services	HC 411 *(HC 1147)*
Thirteenth Report	Selection of a new Chair of the House of Lords Appointments Commission	HC 985
Fourteenth Report	Mandarins Unpeeled: Memoirs and Commentary by Former Ministers and Civil Servants	HC 664 *(HC 428, Session 2008–09)*

Session 2006–07

First Report	The Work of the Committee in 2005–06	HC 258

Second Report	Governing the Future	HC 123 (C*m 7154*)
Third Report	Politics and Administration: Ministers and Civil Servants	HC 122 *(HC 1057, Session 2007–08)*
Fourth Report	Ethics and Standards: The Regulation of Conduct in Public Life	HC 121 *(HC 88, Session 2007–08)*
Fifth Report	Pensions Bill: Government Undertakings relating to the Financial Assistance Scheme	HC 523 *(HC 922)*
Sixth Report	The Business Appointment Rules	HC 651 *(HC 1087)*
Seventh Report	Machinery of Government Changes	HC 672 *(HC 90, Session 2007–08)*
Eighth Report	The Pensions Bill and the FAS: An Update, Including the Government Response to the Fifth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 922 *(HC 1048)*
Ninth Report	Skills for Government	HC 93 *(HC 89)*
First Special Report	The Governance of Britain	HC 901

Session 2005–06

First Report	A Debt of Honour	HC 735 (Cm 1020)
Second Report	Tax Credits: putting things right	HC 577 *(HC 1076)*
Third Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	HC 1033 *(HC 1205)*
Fourth Report	Propriety and Honours: Interim Findings	HC 1119 *(Cm 7374)*
Fifth Report	Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs	HC 689 *(HC 91, Session 2007–08)*

Oral evidence

Taken before the Public Administration Committee

on Thursday 9 July 2009

Members present

Dr Tony Wright, in the Chair

Paul Flynn	Mr Gordon Prentice
David Heyes	Paul Rowen
Kelvin Hopkins	Mr Charles Walker
Julie Morgan	

_____

Witnesses: **Mr Simon Hoggart**, _The Guardian,_ **Mr Matthew Parris**, _The Times,_ **Mr David Crystal**, Honorary Professor of Linguistics, Bangor University and **Ms Marie Clair**, Spokesperson, Plain English Campaign, gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: Let us make a start. We are delighted to welcome Matthew Parris of _The Times_, Simon Hoggart of _The Guardian_, Professor David Crystal, known to all, and Marie Clair of the Plain English Campaign. We are delighted to have you with us. Perhaps I could say, by way of introduction, welcome to our stakeholders. We look forward to our engagement, as we roll out our dialogue on a level playing field, so that, going forward in the public domain, we have a win-win step change that is fit for purpose across the piece.
Professor Crystal: He is speaking outside the box!
Ms Clair: That is £10 in the swear box, I think.

Q2 Chairman: In a sense, we know all this stuff that is floating around us, and we know what Orwell told us back in 1946, that "prose consists less and less of _words_ chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of _phrases_ tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house." We have that all around us in official language, and what I really want to ask you is: Does this drivel matter or does it just irritate us?
Professor Crystal: I think one has to ask the question: What is political language for? There are many answers to that question. For most people, language is simply a matter of communicating clearly, intelligibly—so I understand you, you understand me—but when it comes to politics other considerations apply. When somebody is making a political statement, they are not just making a statement as human being to human being; they are making a statement that is representative of an organisation, a political party, so there is a question of identity straight away. Politicians' statements have to conform in some sense or other to the party to which they belong. Even independents have an identity of that sort. Then it is not just a matter of identifying one's language with what other people on one's side use, one also has to bear in mind the question of personal consistency. Politicians are always aware that there are other people in the wings waiting to say "Gotcha!" because what you said this week was not what you said last week. You have to remember that while you are communicating, as well: the need for personal consistency. Thirdly, there

is the matter of credibility, because one's words have to live up to one's deeds. There are people in the wings saying, "You said you would do this and you have not done that." These considerations are overreaching considerations. It is a matter of credibility, a matter of personal reputation, almost, that drives a great deal of political language when politicians talk to politicians. Then there is the second question of what happens when you try to re-interpret, almost translate, all that kind of language play—because it is a kind of game that is played when politicians are talking to each other—interpret in a way which the general public will understand. There is a huge translation exercise that has to take place here. Instead of the pressure on the individual politician to talk more abstractly, more opaquely, more generally—after all, you cannot be accused of lying if people have not understood what you have said—if one's language at that level is very general and you have to turn it into language that the public will understand, you have to do an immense translation exercise, or somebody has to, and there are various stages in which that takes place. The parliamentary draftspeople have to interpret that into a legalistic kind of communication which makes sense in standard historical terms, respecting tradition and respecting contemporary language as well, and then another group of people have to turn that into something that is accessible to the general public. There are three stages in political language, and how one integrates all of these into a single coherent mindset I am not entirely sure.

Q3 Chairman: But if politicians and public officials speak and write in the way in which I just characterised it and we all know about, what I am really asking you is, knowing all that, does it matter?
Professor Crystal: It matters if the result is dissatisfaction. In so far as everybody is happily talking the same language and everybody is equally not understanding each other, or is happy to tolerate those levels of lack of transparency, then it does not matter. All groups talk like this. Every group has its jargon. There is no group on this earth that does not have a jargon. It is when that jargon becomes opaque to the outsider, when the people say, "It is

not just enough for us to talk to each other, we have to talk to the outside world" and they forget the demands of the audience, that it gets tricky.

Q4 Chairman: If doctors talk to doctors in a language that nobody understands apart from doctors, that does not matter. It matters when they talk to patients.
Professor Crystal: Exactly.

Q5 Chairman: But if they have their private language, it does not matter. We are a committee of public administration. Politics is a public activity. Services are public services. Surely there has to be a "publicness" of language attached to that, and so it is different from the examples that you gave.
Professor Crystal: Yes, there does indeed, and it is not easy to achieve that kind of public accessibility. It is easy enough to criticise. Over and over one sees people pointing to the kinds of clichés that you mentioned when you made your opening remarks a few minutes ago. That is easy to do. It is easy to say, "Look at that and that and that." It is much more difficult to replace it with something that is going to meet the need. That is where the difficulty lies.

Q6 Chairman: Okay. Matthew, does it matter?
Mr Parris: It matters, but more to politicians and public servants than it matters to the public. The public are not fooled by this kind of thing. I think the Plain English Campaign has done a very good job in diminishing the incidents of opaquely technical language in public communications. The number of application forms that one cannot understand, the instructions from local government that one simply cannot understand has fallen. I think that campaign has been quite successful. The new vice is the attempt to talk in a falsely simple language, of which politicians are particularly guilty but so are local authorities—all the time of "vision" and "passion" and "core values" and "level playing fields" and all the rest—which the public immediately recognise as public service speak, in a sense, and immediately cotton on to. Subliminally. I do not think they recognise it consciously, but unconsciously they recognise it and discount it. I would say that politicians and public servants themselves are damaging their own credibility, damaging their own profiles, their own cause, by talking in this language, but I do not think the public are fooled.

Q7 Chairman: Have politicians not just borrowed this language from other bits of life?
Mr Parris: Yes. Politicians are particularly vulnerable to not really knowing very much about anything in particular but wanting to sound more knowledgeable than they actually are, so, like drowning men clutching at straws, they grab at what sound like the vogue expressions, particularly from public relations and professional communications.

Q8 Chairman: I think we recognise the syndrome that you have described. Simon, do you think it matters?

Mr Hoggart: Yes, if only because politicians may fool themselves in the end. It is curious, looking at a Question Time that Alan Johnson had about a year ago, one of the most straight-speaking of all the Cabinet ministers we know, and yet—he can only have been briefed by civil servants: he was fairly new in the job of health secretary—he produced a whole string of terrible phrases, which I think you probably have: "putting on the front foot," "new models of care," "a quality and outcomes framework," "best practice flowing readily to the frontline," "openness on quality of outcomes," "unlocking talent," et cetera. The analogy I would give is that it is a bit like a small child playing with Lego. Each brick in itself is fine. Even phrases like "coterminous stakeholder engagement" have a meaning—it means talking to the people who are affected all the time—but you compress that into a little brick (of three words), you add another brick, and then you put on another brick, and your child suddenly—and we have all seen children do this—suddenly produces something that is not anything at all, it is just a lot of Lego, and it all hangs together but it is absolutely meaningless and has no purpose or function whatsoever. I do think there is a danger of that happening. The classic instance, of course, was when Alan Clarke came back from a drunken wine tasting in the early 1980s, I think he was employment minister at the time, and gave a speech. He was obviously pissed, but if you read his diaries what made it worse was that the whole speech, which he had not read before giving it, was written entirely in jargon written by the civil servants and that made it twice as bad—and of course Clare Short interrupted him and government business was almost cancelled and so on. Clarke was a victim there of the Civil Service trying to do his job for him. Also, finally, it is not a New Labour thing altogether, although I think New Labour have made it worse. Take the classic phrase "care in the community"; two wonderfully warm words. We are all in favour of care and we are all in favour of community. Even then people talk about the "heterosexual community," which is 95% of us and we are all supposed to agree and have interests in common, or the "settled community," which is the 99.9% of us who are not travellers. "Care in the community" sounds wonderful. In fact, as we know, it means poor, mad women exposing themselves in Victoria Gardens. It is a wonderfully glowing phrase. You have the feeling over and over again with politics that, once you have the alliteration or the neat phrase—"train to gain"—"patient pathways"—then you are halfway to solving the problem and you are not.

Q9 Chairman: If we banished all this politician speak, your column will be dead in the water, will it not?
Mr Parris: Of course, yes. I would be out of work.

Q10 Chairman: Let me turn to Marie Clair. What Matthew said is interesting and I think he is right, which is that things like forms and stuff have improved hugely over the years, largely because of

the efforts of your campaign, and yet this kind of speak and writing has grown, has it not? This kind of disease. How are we to explain this paradox?

Ms Clair: First of all, on the question that you were asking originally about does it matter, I think it must matter because even within these walls and within the Hansard reports, if you type in "plain English" and "gobbledegook" or "jargon" those words will bring up numerous examples of complaints from the people working here who are having problems themselves with understanding the internal language. Even though we have jargon that is acceptable within peer groups, as Professor Crystal mentions, it does get to a point where it matters to those people because it is getting in the way of them doing their jobs. When that escapes into the public, it becomes unbearable, because the sense of it has been lost completely or is not explained at any time, it is assumed that the public understand any one interpretation. If we look at one word, "sustainability," that is used in so many different councils and local authorities for so many different reasons and every office has its own interpretation, so what is a member of the public meant to make of that word when they see it in any context? What happens when language has all these layers is that there is even more possibility for the Chinese whispers. The campaign has been saying for a long time, "Why do we need all these layers?" Why can we not start off with plain English?" Yes, it is difficult. It is not about simple English, it is not about "cat sat on the mat" and we are not trying to dumb down the intelligence of anyone at all, but there is clearly a need for something that takes the jargon away and makes it more universal and acceptable for people to take on their responsibilities -and that is everybody here as well as the people in the streets. It is those laws and regulations, the legislation that is produced, it is those very useful projects and initiatives that the councils bring together and spend money on which sadly fail because of how informed the public are about them. It sounds great, as you say—"train to gain" or "partnership pathways" sound great—but what does it mean to anyone who can benefit if they cannot fill in the form.

Q11 Chairman: Surely it is even worse than that. Simon was onto this. Surely if people speak and write in this way it means that they are not thinking about what they are saying—or they are trying to deceive, but usually they are not thinking about what they are saying—and that has real world consequences. Orwell made the point—and it was in 1946, but nevertheless—that one ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end." Is that right? Is it serious enough that if you start at the verbal end you might do something about the underlying problem of policy and approach?

Ms Clair: Of course it is.

Professor Crystal: If you asked Orwell, "How exactly are you proposing to do this?" then you got an awful lot of waffle by way of reply. Orwell was

very opaque when he was pressed on this point, and in the end he came down to suggesting half a dozen what he thought were solutions to the problem. One of them, I recall, was: Never use a passive when an active will do, but when you analyse Orwell's language you find he uses passives all the time. It is easy to think up some simple solutions and say, "We must always do this," but actually language is usually more complicated than any person like Orwell has so far suggested. If it had been as simple as that, of course we would not be sitting here today.

Mr Hoggart: I read of a doctor absolutely driven to the edge of his reason, according to his letter, because of an ad from some medical magazine. It was for the NHS in Leicester which was getting members from "the health economy"—I assume that means doctors, nurses, administrators—"for our first clinical cabinet. The cabinet will drive an integrated approach to strategic change based on the next stage review workstream, raise the quality of our strategic leadership to ensure our commissioning priorities, working culture and determination, passion and commitment"—as opposed to sloth and evasiveness—"a new approach to commissioning clinical engagement"—which I suspect means treating patients. We have all read this a thousand times and me reading it out gets us nowhere, but we could be facing the "cat sat on the mat" problem that Marie mentioned. "The clinical cabinet will try to find ways of treating more people quicker and better" is what they mean, but is that not too simple? There must be some kind of balance about how you set about it. We all know what we want to achieve, we all know grotesque language for describing it which is inaccessible to any one of the patients, but presumably in the middle there is some way in which we can say: This is what we want to do and this is approximately how we intend to do it. We never seem to get that.

Mr Parris: Starting at the verbal end, I think mockery is very important. If we just keep up a constant barrage of mockery so that the culprits begin to realise that it is not clever and that it is not getting them anywhere, we will achieve something.

Q12 Chairman: You and Simon have been doing this for years. We have not cracked it, have we?

Professor Crystal: Mockery is not enough. You need models. You need good models. It is all very well poking fun. It is easy to poke fun—not that I am saying your job is very easy, guys, but given that the examples are so egregious then it is easy to poke fun—but it is much more difficult to say, "Here's a model of good practice." This is one of the things that the Plain English Campaign was extremely good at doing very early on in its history. They did not just shred; they said, "Here is an example of how it should be done." In so far as you are talking about the improvement in the structure of forms and things like that, it is perfectly easy to show. It is much more difficult to show examples of good practice in speech. That is what we need. Would it be possible for all of us here to say, "Here is a politician who gave an absolutely clear and good example of . . ."

whatever it was? If we cannot achieve that kind of universal agreement, then maybe we are looking for something that is a myth.
Chairman: Okay. I want to bring in some colleagues.

Q13 Kelvin Hopkins: Following on from this, it is more worrying that we now live in a culture now, it seems, of jargon and New Labour speak. Recently we had before us a wonderful minister called Liam Byrne.
Professor Crystal: He was on *Today* this morning.

Q14 Kelvin Hopkins: We had one of his speeches, made in St Albans, which was apparently a very important political speech, and I did not understand any of it at all. It worried me even more that I do not think he understood it. He was churning out a lot of jargon and disjointed phrases which gave the impression of somebody very intelligent but I do not think anybody on either side understood it. This is worrying. It is a way of apparently impressing people that one is very intelligent and yet not saying anything that is intelligible to anybody. Is this not rather worrying? Politics is a serious business. It affects people's lives.
Professor Crystal: If somebody did that all the time, one would be very worried indeed. I suspect he was on a bad day there. I have heard that example. It was on *Today* this morning and I could not understand it either. I suspect he will be very embarrassed about that particular example. If somebody spoke like that all the time, I do not think he would be in the job for very much longer.
Mr Parris: I doubt that!

Q15 Chairman: Well, you worked for us. You would understand more about that.
Professor Crystal: But he who is without sin casts the first stone here. All of us have occasions when we wish we had never said what we have said or that we could have said it more clearly. I think, once again, one needs to look at the context and look for good models.

Q16 Kelvin Hopkins: My second point is that I have a feeling that we do not pull people up enough. I had a rigorous grammar school education and when I wrote nonsense I would have "Nonsense" written across it, and "Rewrite," by my English teacher. At home my father would constantly correct my English. When I was in industry, we had rules about no sentence being more than 15 words: "Remember, you are writing for *Daily Mirror* readers not *The Guardian* and *The Times* readers"—with great respect. "Write in a way which can be understood by anybody, in clear English—not oversimplified, but clear English." When I worked at the TUC for five years, if it was not proper English we would have a line put through it by our head of department. We do not pull people up enough. I had my knuckles rapped so many times when I was younger that I learned to write at least simple basic English and not to use jargon. Do we pull people up enough? Making

fun of them is one thing, but somebody, a senior civil servant, saying, "Minister, that's rubbish, please rewrite it"—do we not do enough of that?
Mr Parris: I think we mock them quite effectively. I would reinforce Simon's point: it is not just New Labour; the caring Conservatives are guilty of this too. Mr Byrne is a particularly good or bad example: a beacon of bad practice, I suppose one might say. He, in a sense, illustrates exactly what I have been trying to say about the false use of plain English. He does the glottal stop, the estuarial "it needs to be deba-ed" or "the glo-al stop," which is not natural to him but, unconsciously, he is trying to give the impression—and he is not alone in this—of levelling with his audience and quite often using plain and simple language but in fact to confusing effect.

Q17 Kelvin Hopkins: The other rather more sinister aspect of this, I think, is that we are trying to change people's attitudes politically. The use of the word "customer," for example, in the place of "patient," "pupil," or "student" is trying to put across the idea that every relationship is between a buyer and a seller—or "purchaser/provider" in the jargon—and that it is all a commercial relationship. It is all about markets. It is all about buying and selling. It is not about providing public services and social rights. Is this new language not rather more sinister?
Professor Crystal: It can be. It depends what the purpose behind it is. I think you are absolutely right when you say that people need training in improving their awareness of what the issues are. There was a time for some of us who are slightly less young than others when we got this training routinely in school and then there were a couple of generations when this kind of training went out completely: there was no grammar work done in school or anything of that kind. Fortunately, thanks to the National Curriculum this has come back in again. I do quite a lot of work in schools and I have seen sixth formers, for instance, taking a political speech that has been transcribed and re-writing it and re-thinking and going behind the scenes of it and trying to work out what the nuances are of terms like "customer" and so on and so forth. At the moment I think we are rearing a new generation of kids who are much more aware about the issues than the last two generations have been. Unfortunately, the people who grew up in the last two generations are often now in positions of considerable responsibility and so we are seeing more of that kind of unawareness of language variation than I think was present in my day when I went to school and I think is increasingly now happily becoming restored once again.
Mr Parris: It is not necessarily sinister, but I think there is often an ulterior motive. I think the use of "customer" spread under John Major's government and was, I suppose to the extent that there was any conscious or unconscious purpose intended to convey to those who provide public services the idea that those to whom they provide the services were customers rather than just the passive recipients, but you are right that there was an agenda, so to speak, behind the word, a word that has arisen perhaps in

the last decade or more, perhaps under John Major again, I cannot remember, is "jobseeker," which means unemployed but it gives a positive impression. In fact the Government could almost boast that there are now more jobseekers than ever before.

Q18 Paul Flynn: Perhaps I can say a word in defence of Liam Byrne. There is a very small group of us, I think, in the friends of Liam Byrne. We did listen, we were rapt when he came to us, we were fascinated trying to extract these nuggets of meaning from this great flow of words we had, but one of the expressions he used and I have heard him use again was "rising horizons". I can understand "retreating horizons" and "advancing horizons" but a "rising horizon" means there is a tsunami on the way, but it does jerk the mind into some activity. There is a sign that there is an inventive mind behind "Liam Byrne speak". If we go ahead and insist that everyone speaks in this plain, sort of utility English, life is going to become very boring, is it not?
Mr Hoggart: There is a difference between plain, utilitarian English and English which can inform and inspire. I was just asking myself a moment ago how Churchill would have broadcast if a civil servant had got to his main speeches during the war. He would have talked about an "ongoing programme of hostile engagement in littoral sectors" for "fight them on the beaches". What Churchill said was an example of an absolutely perfect political speech, admittedly in circumstances which we hope will not arise in our immediate futures, but what I am saying is that you do not have to go back to very tedious, boring, workaday English. You can say what you mean and say it in a way—

Q19 Paul Flynn: I found myself yesterday in a Westminster Hall debate using the expression "collateral damage." Going back to that, that phrase was invented, I believe, in the Libyan war and Libyan bombing by the Americans, and it was designed to disguise a horrible truth of women and children being blown to pieces by bombs, and you put this nice phrase of "collateral damage". But has not the usage changed, to the effect that we have the same horror now to the expression "collateral damage" as we do to the reality as someone described it before? And does that not mean that these expressions that are meant to be euphemisms suddenly become into the language?
Mr Parris: Absolutely. Another one is "challenge". These days you do not say that you have encountered difficulties or problems or that you have failed; you say that you are being challenged or have encountered challenges, and the result is the public use now of the word "challenge" means difficulties or problems and conveys exactly the meaning that its initial adoption was intended to avoid.
Professor Crystal: All politically correct language is like that.

Q20 Paul Flynn: In my generation sportsmen always talked about "getting a result": "We want to get a result today" and what they actually meant was a

win. A draw is a result. I mean, anything is a result—but that is the way that language changes. Could you perhaps offer some help to the present Speaker? The present Speaker is very courageously trying to improve parliamentary language. He keeps appealing to Members to ask questions that are "pithy"—the word he used—brief questions and there has been a perceptible change in the way that Question Time goes on. The questions are briefer, there are more questions reached. What would you suggest he should do to improve parliamentary communications?
Mr Hoggart: He is already shutting people up, is he not, though not quite as often as I would like. There were some questions yesterday at PMQs that went on for an awfully long time. There is another good example too of the way that statistics—a different subject—the same book, the Red Book full of statistics, is interpreted entirely contradictory way by both the Government and the Opposition, an argument which we have had every single week for the past several weeks, and language can have the same effect as well. I would like to hear him say, "I didn't understand that question, would you please repeat it?" but instead, of course, he naturally wants to move on. There is no encouragement yet to phrase stuff more coherently as well as there is already to phrase stuff more concisely.
Mr Parris: He will need to improve his own delivery too. He has in the past very often spoken as though someone were chiselling his words into granite as he spoke. There is a sort of ponderousness there which is equally to be avoided.
Professor Crystal: One also has to ask the question: Why does one ask a question in the first place? For most ordinary people you ask a question in order to get an answer to something you do not know. In parliamentary circles, you already know the answer before you ask the question. Very often the aim of asking the question is to wrong-foot the answerer and therefore it pays you to express your question in an obscure way because then you have a much greater chance of wrong-footing the answerer.

Q21 Paul Flynn: There are people who are trained to come before select committees, by lobbyists and other groups, and I am certain that the general advice is to speak for as long as possible and to be as incomprehensible as possible if you are trying to hide something—which most of them are—and if we dare to interrupt them or tell them that we do not understand what they are saying, we might be pilloried. How can we improve our act with those who are disguising the truth?
Mr Parris: Just keep interrupting. Whenever anybody begins to obfuscate, just keep interrupting.

Q22 Paul Flynn: There should be obstructive rudeness from ourselves.
Mr Parris: Testing it, as a judge might do, just saying, "What do you mean?"

Q23 Paul Flynn: Do you think we suffer from an excess of courtesy?

Mr Hoggart: It rather depends on who you are seeing. Looking at the Treasury Committee facing the bankers who brought the nation to its knees, they were pretty rough, but if you are dealing with people who are explaining their views, then clearly shutting them up is not your priority, is it?

Mr Parris: I think it is important not to feel that pulling people up on the way they are expressing themselves or getting edgy about their phrasing is either pedantic or trivial, but I think that Members of select committees and others should not be ashamed or embarrassed to keep pulling people up on small matters of the way they express themselves even if the issue is larger.

Professor Crystal: That is a very important point, if I may say so. The situation you are encountering at the moment, we are encountering at the moment, has arisen over a long period of time. There were debates of this kind going on in the 19th century and in the 18th century. Obscure language is not a modern 21st century phenomenon. What is modern is our awareness of the nature of the problem and, quite frankly, a desire to do something about it, which is unusual, but it cannot be done all at once. It has to be done drip, drip, drip, as Matthew says. To go back to the "rising horizons" example, it would only take one person to say, "What exactly do you mean by that?" or to make a joke about it from the other side and say, "I expect that's a tsunami then" and there will be a laugh all around and he will never use that again. That kind of focused criticism I think is very valuable.

Q24 Chairman: There are some permanent things to do with political language, evasiveness and so on that have always been true, but surely this new level has come in. I do not want to personalise it with Mr Byrne, but the fact that he came, I think, from the world of management consultancy surely is the clue. One of the great perks that MPs get—and they will not probably get it for very long—is to be able to travel by first class train to their constituency, which means that you can now listen in to conversations by people on the train, and there are an awful lot of management consultants, and they talk in this kind of language and you see it creeping into politics. Is that not something new that has happened? The more we have had the consultancies come in, the more we have had this language develop.

Mr Parris: Like politics, management consultancy is a profession trying to invent reasons for itself, and consequently it has every incentive to develop private languages with an impression of a sort of priesthood. Perhaps there is some community of interest between management consultancy and politics.

Mr Walker: I do not think so.

Q25 Chairman: Discuss.

Professor Crystal: Whatever has been happening in the past, of course, the situation is changing in an unprecedented way in relation to the future because all the pressures on language hitherto have been pressures on traditional speech and traditional writing. Now we have the internet. The internet is changing all the rules because it is making accessible to a much wider public, stuff that previously it would have been very difficult to get hold of and even to become aware of. If you think now that the amount of language that is on the internet is larger than everything in all the libraries of the world combined and the amount of information on the internet is doubling every 10 or 12 hours, admittedly often by visual stuff like YouTube rather than textual stuff, but nonetheless we are dealing with a new scenario here. It will be interesting to see what happens. Whereas previously we have been able to criticise stuff that we hear in audio terms and in traditional written language, when the politicians, as it were, become more present in all the networking forums, Twittering away and doing all these things that hitherto you have not been doing very much of, I suspect we are going to have a very different kind of game to play.

Q26 Mr Walker: Do you not think Twittering would diminish politics even more than it has already been diminished, because life is more serious than, "I'm sitting in a restaurant and John Prescott has walked past"?

Professor Crystal: When you start examining what people are tweeting about, you find that such sentences form only part of the subject matter of tweets. One of the things that a Twitter context does is it gives you 140 characters to say what you mean. That is a knife over you to be succinct and to sort yourself out. Waffle is very unusual on Twitter. I know people who will say, "I'm stuck in a lift" and all that sort of thing, yes, they do that, but there are some quite serious succinct observations being made. I think that if Twittering were a part of the routine training of a politician things might improve quite considerably.

Q27 Mr Prentice: If politicians enter cyberspace, is there not a danger that we can leave behind people who are not wired up?

Professor Crystal: Yes.

Q28 Mr Prentice: The people who are not computer literate. We would be criticised for using cyberspeak.

Professor Crystal: It is a new function, you are absolutely right. None of this is to replace what is there before. This is the old argument about is the computer going to replace the book? It is not. Books will carry on being what they are and then the computer will do what it does very well. All I am saying is that there is a new medium here which is not going to go away. It is very much a linguistic medium and the problems of everything we have talked about today are going to turn up writ large on the internet. In other words, you must not ignore it as a dimension to the discussion.

Q29 Paul Flynn: We are going to see Twitter as new literature. In the past poets have confined themselves to the discipline of sonnet form. If someone has to confine themselves to this very narrow limit of Twittering, the words are going to be more concentrated and richer, presumably. Do you see this

as a new art form and that literature of the future will be defined perhaps by supreme examples of Twittering?

Mr Parris: It is not quite the new haiku.

Professor Crystal: No, I do not think so. On the other hand, the analogy of the haiku is very interesting and you can express yourself with green emotion and sensitivity and great meaning if you are constrained in that way. After all, we talked a little while ago about what it was like when some of us were at school once upon a time. Did we not all have paraphrases from our teachers: "Reduce this paragraph to 50 words" or something of that kind? You can get 35 or 40 words into a Twitter message, you know. It is not that different.

Q30 Chairman: We could probably get rid of PMQs and have Twitter time.

Professor Crystal: I do not know what is happening in the House but I gave a lecture in Florida the other day and at the end of it the organiser came up to me and said, "Would I like to see my Twitter score?" I said, "What's my Twitter score?" and he said, "It's the number of people who have sent tweets to the internet while you were lecturing." I had 20 tweets. I was very proud of myself.

Mr Hoggart: Were they about your lecture, or were they just bored?

Professor Crystal: I am not saying. A mixture of the two, Simon.

Ms Clair: Perhaps I could say from the campaign's point of view, because obviously we are taking this opportunity to voice what we receive from the public: Twitter is great, texting is great, talking in jargon is great as long as it is understood. The real issues, challenges, the problem is simply that there are people out there in real-life situations who are suffering because they do not understand the language. That is what the campaign is concerned about. Those are the things that I receive in my inbox on a daily basis and a lot of those are still about government documents. The 30 years of fighting that we have been doing has made a dent, but it is a very sporadic—is that too jargon a word? All these little bits of action going on all the time through these 30 years, and it is very commendable—there is lots of investment, there is lots of passion and effort going in there—but there is no-one with power, with real influence allowing this to be set as a standard. At whatever level whoever decides, whoever is the expert to make those decisions, we simply want to see people having a better chance at understanding and using the public information that is available to them in whatever form.

Q31 Chairman: I was surprised to discover, reading your literature, that when you had these various awards that you give out—I mean the good awards and the bad awards, whatever you call them— government departments started winning all the good awards, did they not, and so you had to develop some more awards so that they could not win.

Ms Clair: In 1983 when we had the Rayner review in the Thatcher Government they had hundreds, thousands of documents that were either done away with altogether or edited by the campaign with the help of the various civil servant and government offices. That was a huge onslaught and because it was such a big thing they needed to motivate those people. They needed to see it was worthwhile. They had the support from above at that time, they had the resources available to them, and they just needed to galvanise people into getting this job done— because it is not easy. It is not the case of just "sat on the mat" we all know that, but there is a way of achieving it, otherwise we would not have been gainfully employed for the past 30 years and there would not have been successes with these awards that we do give out to other bodies.

Professor Crystal: It is more than just the awards. Marie rather humbly says, "We've made a bit of a dent." They have made a huge hole. The Plain English Campaign, not alone but at the forefront, has formed a climate of opinion. When we ask, "Who is going to do something about this?" what will never work is the top-down academy approach. There is no expert, there is no group of experts that would be given any credibility in any British system. The French might like it, but the British on the whole do not do things that way. Dr Johnson was one of the first to point this out. Top-down decisions on language never work. Going back to the internet, what you have done is form a climate of opinion which makes ordinary people very ready to criticise. You see it on the social networking forums all the time or after a radio programme and you scroll down to the forum of discussion that takes place after the programme, and you are getting people much more ready now to say, "I didn't understand that. What was he talking about? How dare he say this?" and you get that level of discussion taking place which I think is moving the climate forward.

Q32 Julie Morgan: Paul mentioned poetry and poetry in relation to Twittering. Andrew Motion said that poetry makes language arresting, and it seems to me that a lot of the language that is generally used by politicians, by government is used in the sort of way that you want it to be merged into the wallpaper so that nobody notices what it is really at all. I wondered what comments you would have on making language arresting, so that it does reach people and it does mean something to people, but also aware of all the layers that David has mentioned that you are trying to get over when you are communicating.

Ms Clair: We deal with this. Whether it is private or public sector organisations that we work with, we go in there to edit and train with them on plain English and clearer communication, and they need to make people engage—I am using all these key words and I want you to score them at the end—because I think that language is still creative. The campaign recognises that language is something that is very closely related to the culture and the society that we live in and it does create that culture and community

to a large degree, depending on the way that you communicate with people and the language we use. We do not want to get rid of that creativity but we do not feel that there is a place for it in public information. There is a point where there are life and death situations being considered and you do not want arresting language in that situation; you simply want to know the facts in a way that you can read, understand and deal with the situation responsibly.

Mr Parris: I think it so much depends on whether one has anything to say. It is the fate of politicians, and not particularly the fault of politicians, very often to be having to fill time with words when they have not anything much to say. They wish to be memorable and use arresting language at the same time as not conveying anything significant or arresting. The use of these rather florid metaphors, for instance, of "beacons" and "milestones" and "blood on the carpet" and "fatally holed below the waterline" is an attempt to be arresting when what you have to say is rather prosaic.

Mr Hoggart: There is a real problem for politicians, which is that your medium is the speech and it has been for centuries and centuries. The speech is essentially 10 minutes or 20 minutes or an hour long, and it makes an argument and has a beginning, a middle and an end and it is packed with stuff. If you take a typical leader's speech at the party conference, every line has been gone over for not hours but days. I remember Margaret Thatcher was saved from the Brighton bomb because she was still up at three o'clock working on her conference speech for the next day. Yet what we remember from those speeches are tiny bits: "back to basics" from one of John Major's, or "British jobs for British people" from Gordon Brown a couple of years ago. "I don't have a reverse gear" and "Scars on my back" is all that anyone remembers from Tony Blair's speeches over those years. It seems to me that you are going to have to take another look at that—or "revisit it" in the jargon—because people are not reading the speeches. They are not even listening to the speeches, as we know. I remember Matthew came out—did you not?—in the House of Commons on the grounds that nobody would notice and you would get away with it, as it were. I am sorry, I did not mean that crudely, but your constituents would not see. Maybe a Twitter or an acknowledgement that there is a fantastic amount of written material and speech material out there, and that, as David has said, the internet contains more than every library in the world put together. You are just going to have to realise you are in competition with all those other sources of information and opinion and just come out with one line. Maybe the Speaker should reduce speeches to one minute and you would just have to stand up and say, "No, you're wrong, because . . ." and then sit down again.

Ms Clair: Yes.

Q33 Chairman: Is not a further problem with the same issue—and I found myself saying this to a prime minister—fancy having to make the same speech over and over again? That is hideous. It has

the consequence, does it not, that you do reach for the prefabricated words and you just block them altogether? How else would you survive?

Professor Crystal: Indeed.

Q34 Paul Flynn: There is one good example. Peter Bottomley was challenged by John Major and others one time to include extraneous information in parliamentary answers. The information, if I remember, was that Burkina Faso means land of brave warriors, that Anne Boleyn had six fingers on the left hand, and that frogs make love with their eyes shut. In fact in a session of parliamentary answers when he was transport minister he conveyed all these bits of information and no-one noticed or objected. There must be a lesson here on the basis that nobody listens to the first answers. Even the person who is going to ask the supplementary question is listening in his head to what he or she is going to say next. That went through the House without comment as he was sacked a few weeks later by Mrs Thatcher, quite sensibly, which you wrote about. What lessons are there for the new Speaker to take on? All this verbiage that comes around, you can say almost anything, and there is not a soul that is listening—except possibly the sketch writers.

Mr Hoggart: Not even us. The best sessions I ever go to in the Commons are not necessarily on Prime Minister's Question Time, which are great for us but achieve absolutely nothing as far as I can see. They do not usually make it past the *Six O'clock News*. It is rare for a carefully crafted sound bite which has the sweat of a hundred aides all over it to make it to the *Ten O'clock News* bulletin. But it is when the House is going through line by line on a bill which will affect everybody's lives. I was quite impressed by the discussion on the Finance Bill the other day in the report stage because at least people were talking about real things that mattered in a real kind of way. There is not a heck of a lot of that going about at the moment, is there?

Q35 Julie Morgan: You have talked about the arresting phrases. What about "broken society"? What is your view of that. It seems to me to be an overused phrase.

Mr Parris: Here we stray, in a sense, into politics. It is a good gripping, arresting phrase. The question is what is the speaker—probably David Cameron in this case—trying to convey. If he really means he thinks society is broken, that is extremely interesting. If he does not really mean that but is simply trying to exaggerate the effect of what in practice is perhaps a less ambitious remark, then this is another example of grasping for apparently arresting speech to say something that, on examination, is saying rather less.

Professor Crystal: The trouble with arresting speech is that the other side can home in on it very, very quickly and twist it into something even more arresting. It would only take somebody to say, "It's an unbroken society" or something of that kind and take the metaphor and extend it in new directions and of course you are then hoist with your own petard.

Mr Hoggart: A classic example is the "hug a hoodie". Cameron never said that. He just said we should be more understanding of feral young men, if you like, and this became "hug a hoodie," which I suspect did him a great deal of harm.

Q36 Mr Prentice: It is not just politicians who are the guilty men and guilty women; it is political commentators as well, is it not? Every time I read Steve Richards in *The Independent* he is talking about the "narrative" and it just makes me scream. After the Prime Minister delivered his speech on *Building Britain's Future*, Matthew Taylor, who pronounces on these things, talked about "lacking a core narrative" and the General Secretary of the Fabian Society talked about this document having "an underlying strategy but it lacks narrative and it lacks animation". These people kind of mediate, do they not? Their job is to explain what we, the politicians, are trying to say, but in that explanation they obscure things. What on earth does narrative mean, Simon?
Mr Hoggart: Used as a quality that an event or speech ought to have, then it is jargon, but it is quite a good way of looking at the way the press handles many stories and narrative simply means a story, but narrative, if you like—

Q37 Mr Prentice: Why not say story, then?
Mr Hoggart: Indeed. The story of the end of the Major administration was that it was absolutely hopeless, it was heading for the rocks, everything they did was wrong, it was packed with scandal, and because that was the narrative, if you like the story that everybody had focused on and agreed on, then everything you read in the papers was that the Major government was utterly hopeless and beyond redemption, and I think contributed to the landslide in 1997. That, if you like, is the narrative. The narrative now is that Gordon Brown is absolutely hopeless and beyond redemption. That, I think, does have a meaning, but if you say, as in the examples you quoted, "We must have a narrative to go with our policy," then that is indeed jargon. That is attempting to manipulate the public. The public has already been manipulated by the press, to a large extent.

Q38 Mr Prentice: My broader point is that people like you, who are paid to interpret what we are saying, do not often do a very good job.
Mr Hoggart: I am not paid to interpret what you are saying; I am paid to take the piss.
Professor Crystal: He is absolutely right, though.

Q39 Mr Prentice: I know I am.
Professor Crystal: Because it is not possible to have any piece of written language or spoken language for that matter without some kind of agenda behind it. That is what it is all about. Narrative does not just mean story. Narrative means a story with an agenda. There is always something which is driving the notion of narrative. Yes, you guys have your agendas; that is, to take the piss or whatever it might be. Everybody has an agenda. It is perfectly proper

for people to point out that every domain of human existence has its jargon, has its hidden agenda and so on and so forth; however, it is not enough to say, "Ya boo sucks! You do it as well," because you guys are in a rather different position of power.

Q40 Mr Prentice: What about when politicians use simple words but give those simple words new meaning? In the Prime Minister's relaunch document, *Building Britain's Future* he talked about "entitlement" and I thought that an entitlement would confer a right to something which would be enforceable, but that is really not what entitlement means in the context of that document. What is the Plain English Campaign doing to alert people to the fact that politicians may be using words and giving them a different meaning?
Ms Clair: This is exactly the point that we have to defend often about plain English. It is not dumbing down, it is not simple, it is not about using a short word. Sometimes really to understand and get clarity and honesty behind a meaning, you may need to use more words, but what is essential is that the audience at which you are aiming that message will understand and that the language is appropriate for them. If "entitlement" is a word that is understood in one context amongst one group, that is fine, but we are really concerned when this is used on a much wider basis that it can be interpreted in so many different ways. It is not about complicated words.

Q41 Mr Prentice: Matthew at the beginning said the public are not fooled, and perhaps it is the stock in trade of politicians to fool the public. If politicians are using words routinely like "entitlement" and "guarantee" then they have their agenda. They want people to think that people have new rights which they can exercise, but that is not the case.
Mr Parris: I do not think we need to worry about it too much because I think people see through it very quickly. I think someone who uses "entitlement" in a context in which he does not mean "entitlement" is simply being foolish because the question: "How am I to get my entitlement?" will come quite fast and there will not be an answer. I do not think we need to worry about that.
Mr Hoggart: The equivalent is the ad "You deserve it"—which I think is for hairspray. How the hell do they know? I am lazy and slovenly, what do I deserve?
Chairman: Yes, "Because you deserve it."

Q42 Mr Walker: I cannot recite word for word Churchill's speeches, nor Obama's, nor Tony Blair's.
Professor Crystal: "Yes, we can."

Q43 Mr Walker: But I remember that they had passion, that they could move a room. I remember the clause 4 debate at the Labour Party Conference. John Prescott, a man widely dismissed as being inarticulate, gave the most incredible passionate speech that moved the room. So it is not necessarily what you say; it is how you say it. There was a ripple of laughter when somebody said the one-minute

speech, and you, Marie Clair, said that would be a good thing. I could think of no better way of showing disrespect to people on many occasions than by talking about the sacrifices being made in Afghanistan and Iraq by families and young men by giving it a one-minute speech. I am not quite sure where you gentlemen are coming from. I agree with you that many politicians have little to say but there are a few politicians who have a great deal to say and they say it very well. Do you not accept that?

Ms Clair: I certainly accept that, because, as we said earlier on about the arresting situation, there is a difference between language that is creative, that is emotive, that is passionate—and I am passionate about plain English, but the fact is that plain English needs to be used when it is simply about getting information across in a way that is easily understood. If you are rousing people to feel something, you are not necessarily going to do it in 140 letters, but if people understand what is at the end of that passionate speech, then you have achieved your aim.

Professor Crystal: I think you are absolutely right, Charles. It is only the bad news that gets the publicity. It is only the bad occasions. It is only the people saying, "I didn't understand that." Far more frequently than that are the occasions when people do understand. This morning, as you may not be aware, I had five minutes on *Today* with Matthew and while we were waiting for our turn (because *Today* always treats language as being a little end of term kind of affair) we were listening to Ed Miliband talking. It does not matter about what; the point was, I understood every word. There was five minutes of stuff there and it was absolutely clear, no problem at all about it. I suspect that if one listened and listened and listened, and genuinely listened in an objective way, you would find that probably, I do not know what the percentage would be, the majority of stuff would be clear enough, no problem. That never gets the publicity at all.

Mr Parris: It was Churchill himself who said, "I'm sorry to have made such a long speech but I didn't have time to write a shorter one."

Q44 Mr Walker: And he said, "If you can't say it in 20 minutes, go away and write a book about it." There is an art here to making a speech clearly, and many people go on too long, but do you think the art of speech-making has been downgraded by the fact that the media is simply not interested in reporting much of what is said in the House of Commons? Mr Hoggart, you said that you are here to take the piss, and quite frankly that is what most political journalists do now: they are not really interested in serious politics. Politics has become a branch of the entertainments industry—and we are as much responsible for that as you are.

Mr Hoggart: No, I think we are probably more responsible. There is a Sherlock Holmes' short story—I think it is the *Cardboard Box* - in which Dr Watson is saying how bored he is in August in London, nothing is happening, and he says, "Parliament was not sitting, so there was little to read in the newspapers." It is inconceivable that a news editor would think that, because all the more space for David Beckham's injured foot or whatever and Jordan's marriage break-up. When I came to work here for the first time in 1973, there was a *Times* room—and Matthew will know this—which had 16 people in who produced a record of virtually every speech that was made in the Commons the previous day. Obviously it was not like Hansard, it was not verbatim, but: "Sir Patrick Cormack said that he disagreed with the proposal on the grounds that. . . " and every speech would be mentioned. That is long ago gone. More recently, the papers felt, like you, that we should have more coverage of what was being said in Parliament, and so most of the broad sheets (as we then were) put in an extra parliamentary correspondent who would do the same and produce half a page, perhaps, of what had been said. They soon discovered from the page traffic reports which they do constantly, all the time, that nobody was reading it at all, and they were taken out. I am afraid that one of the reasons why we sketch writers are preserved for the time being at least—and I do not know for how much longer—is that people do read it, and they read it more often than they read the far more important articles about some subtle shift in defence policy.

Q45 Mr Walker: As opposed to wide-screen TVs. Professor Crystal, you were talking about the internet, and you were talking about chat rooms and threads. Why is it that most people in chat rooms and threads that I come across—and maybe I am just unlucky—are just so miserable and violent and vicious? Why are they so malcontented? Why do they wish such terrible things on their fellow mankind? I do not think ordinary, nice, happy people go on to the internet.

Professor Crystal: Yes, they do. You really have to cast your net very, very wide and you do get a lot of what you say but you also get the opposite. I have never done the analysis of positive versus negative attitudes on the internet, but if one did I think one would find a representative selection of all sorts of attitudes. There are some forums which are extremely positive and you would be delighted to be part of them. But the thing about the internet is that, unless the site is moderated, it does allow you to say what you want. An awful lot of people, for whatever reason, do have axes to grind about all sorts of things and, suddenly, they find a medium where you can say whatever you like and in whatever language you like pretty well—although there are a few filters for this and that—and so they make use of it. It is probably a novelty of the medium. I suspect this will slow down as time goes by and people get used to it and realise that sounding off is not going to do much more than, say, cursing when you bang your head against a cupboard door or something like that.

Mr Parris: Information technology can, I think, be bent to your Committee's and to the Plain English Campaign's purpose. A couple of years ago, with a BBC analyst over at Millbank called Paul Twin we made a couple of 15-minute programmes for Radio 4 about very much the subject that your Committee is covering. If the Committee would like, I will see

that they are sent over. All Mr Twin needed to do was to assemble the archive of parliamentary speeches and questions and then do a word search. For instance, for "rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic" I think we found about 430 instances. Of "level playing field," "fatally holed below the waterline," "dead in the water," it is a very good tool for tracking the incidence, the rise and the fall, of particularly unfortunate expressions.

Q46 David Heyes: I would like to try to get a feel from you as to what we ought to be doing about this, what the politicians ought to be doing about it, what recommendations this Committee might make that parliamentarians might act on. I have a pretty clear idea from you of the things you would do: it is a continuation of ridicule—or focused criticism, as you may prefer to call it; a continuation of an effective Plain English Campaign; a continuation of academic work. All that will go on and maybe be stepped up, but what should we be doing? It seems to me this is just one aspect of the loss of faith in politics and politicians that is the most important task of Parliament at the moment to do something about that, to try to rebuild that lost trust, and sorting out the language we use and our accessibility is an important feature. What should we be doing? It is difficult to see how we might legislate. It would not be popular to introduce fines for inappropriate language. We could maybe set up a quango. What else ought we to be doing as politicians?

Mr Hoggart: It is a matter of care, really. On Mr Hopkins's point, it is much harder to write crisply. It takes longer to write a short speech, as Churchill said. Tabloid journalism is far more difficult than what we do because you have to get often a very complicated thing and express it in very few words which will be understood by every single reader. Just take a little bit more time. It is much more important with ministers, who very, very often have speeches prepared for them by civil servants. Ministers are fantastically busy. All Members of Parliament, I know, are fantastically busy. When given a speech, the idea of taking out half an hour from your incredibly busy day and saying, "No, I hate that phrase. That means nothing. What are we really trying to say here?" must be very, very difficult for a minister to do, but if he or she did have time to say, "This is what we are trying to convey to our colleagues in Parliament and to the Public," that would be a wonderful thing.

Professor Crystal: I would say that one thing you can do is focus on the point I was making some time ago about the need for good models. Every now and then I guess most of you will encounter somebody saying something or writing something, and everybody saying, "That was good." We have talked about Churchill, we have talked about Barack Obama, and there will be local examples, where you say, "That was good." What happens to that piece of good English? It is just part of Hansard now and maybe it might get into the press. As you say, it might get the occasional mention, but then it is forgotten forever. Why should there not be a little archive of good practice built up in some way which is party

neutral, when people say these are good examples of not necessarily plain English but effective English in the context in which the language is going to be used.

Q47 Mr Walker: It is not what you say, it is how you say it.
Professor Crystal: It is the way that you say it.

Q48 Mr Walker: Passion. John Prescott, clause 4. "John Smith believes because that is what John Smith believes" was total rubbish but the man was totally believable and he had passion and emotion. That is the difference. That is what moves room, not the bloody content. It is how you say it.
Professor Crystal: It is both.

Q49 Chairman: We should ask Simon about that, because you have had fun with John Prescott over the years.
Mr Hoggart: John Prescott did not use much jargon at all. He used good demotic English; it is just that he got his words jumbled up. He was talking about the firefighters' strike and the FBU became "the FBI", and he talked about the leader "Mr Andy Christ," for example. But he spoke in a very jargon-free way, John Prescott. I notice now that he is a blogger principally, rather than a Member of Parliament. I do not think that was a problem at all, really.

Q50 David Heyes: I would be interested to hear what Matthew and Marie have to say in response to my question. What should we be doing as politicians about this?
Mr Parris: As I said earlier on, not to feel ashamed to be sticklers and to harp on about questions of phraseology and vocabulary. I think it should become a fashionable thing to do.

Q51 Mr Prentice: Should we be comfortable about using words like "subsidy"? I cannot remember the last time I heard a Member of Parliament talk about subsidising".
Mr Parris: No, it is investing now.

Q52 Mr Prentice: It is investing. Maybe we ought just to be more honest with people If we are talking about the East Coast Mainline, we could say to people, "We cannot run a railway without subsidising it," instead of wrapping it up in all this talk about investment.
Mr Hoggart: That came from the bookies, did it not? A £10 investment can win you £100.
Professor Crystal: Have you ever gone in for word clouds yet? Have any of you done word clouds? You take a huge chunk of language and you put it through a computer and the computer spews out a cloud of the words, with the most frequent occurring words most prominent and in a nice big colour, and the next most frequently occurring words not so big, and you get this cloud. If you did that—I am not quite sure how often—day by day or perhaps week by week, then suddenly "subsidy" would be high and then maybe "investment" would be high, and you would see the coming and going of vocabulary.

Maybe if you had that on a screen at the back of the House all the time, it would alert the people to the way things are going.

Chairman: Perhaps you could help us. Perhaps we could produce a glossary, so that whenever one of these words was used people could turn up and see what it meant.

Q53 David Heyes: Is that part of what Plain English—

Ms Clair: Funnily enough, that is one of the methods we use. The recommendations that Chrissie Maher told me to bring to this meeting are no different from what we have been doing over the past 30 years with all sizes of organisation, and that is to get the understanding from people at the top, not necessarily to get them re-writing everything they do in plain English or speaking in plain English when it is not appropriate, but the reality is if those people understand the purpose of clearer communications then those people, the foot soldiers, the ones who are on the frontline who have that job of communicating the message with the public in a way that they understand, they will have the wherewithal, the resources and the proper understanding of what the senior officers mean. You start off with getting everyone at the top understanding what is happening, buying into it—you can tick that one in the box as well—and then you set up a programme, as we do, with training, you review the documents, you look at the material you have, you identify by whatever means where the danger words or dangers areas, the hotspots, are, and you deal with those. You come to some agreement because, yes, not everyone is going to say this is the only way to do something, but that is why it is important to test the solution that you come to with the right audience. A lot of the time, the work that we do, particularly to acquire a crystal mark on a document for any organisation is to test it with the audience that is intended and that sample will give you their honest feedback and you will know whether you have got it right or not. That way there is no excuse for them not understanding.

Q54 Mr Prentice: There is a lot of talk about parliamentary jargon just being impenetrable. Do you get a lot of people talking to you about just how difficult they find it to understand what is happening in Parliament?

Ms Clair: Yes.

Q55 Mr Prentice: Would you like to see us get rid of all this "Honourable Member" stuff and "Right Honourable Member" stuff and talk to each other by name? Would that help?

Ms Clair: From the public responses that we get, they do not want to do away with tradition. There is an understanding that communication is as much a part of our culture and heritage and what makes us the people we are. Some of those traditions are part of what we do, but it is when it comes to public information that is needed to be acted upon, it is fine

if you are going to talk in that way and you are happy to do so within your various meetings and hearings and such like, whether it is in the courts or anywhere else, but at some point that will need to be translated for other people to deal with.

Q56 Mr Prentice: Could I ask our two sketch writers if they would advise the Speaker to modernise and update our parliamentary language and traditions, just to remove that barrier of understanding that there is?

Mr Parris: No, I would not. I think the slightly ceremonious parliamentary language, particularly the rule that one speaks always in the third person rather than the second person does not impede meaning or understanding at all. It does give a slightly ceremonious patina to the whole thing, but it does not impede understanding. I also think, from the point of view of keeping tempers in the House, that once people start saying "you" it can quite quickly turn into something like a fist-fight. That just is a slightly calming influence.

Mr Hoggart: We saw that with Cameron shouting at Brown recently, "You're hopeless." Even Michael Martin paid attention to that. I think Matthew is absolutely right. It has to be "my Right Honourable and gallant friend."

Q57 Kelvin Hopkins: For the first time ever I think I disagree with my colleague Gordon here and agree very strongly with what Matthew and you have just been saying about this third person usage. I may say that I think the debate this morning has been too much about speaking. I think often the speeches we do understand, especially speeches from non-government ministers. The Government is maybe trying to obfuscate and make less clear, in a sense, because they are trying to hide things, whereas everyone else is speaking quite clearly. I must say I enjoy listening to speeches. It is government publications, government statements, and written speeches by ministers where the problem arises. When they are trying to describe something about PFI, for example, PFI is a way of ripping off the public purse, to pour vast sums of money into corporate pockets. That is what PFI is about and yet that does not come across. It is portrayed as something benign. I might say that and nobody would disagree with me. They might say, "I think I would phrase it rather differently", but that is the truth. Speeches, I think, should not be the target. It is publications. It is written statements. It is government statements by ministers.

Mr Parris: Perhaps in its conclusions and recommendations the Committee should suggest that PFI should be replaced with RPP (ripping off the public purse).

Kelvin Hopkins: Absolutely.

Q58 Chairman: A member of the public has sent us in a very nice submission on PFI. I think it is a she and she translates the language in great detail—not quite in the robust way that Kelvin has given us but something pretty close. Perhaps I could just give you

this thought at the end. As you think about this and have this discussion, you can see a terrible danger looming, can you not, which is that if after all this mockery and the rest of it politicians finally do get the message and therefore they work out that a sort of plain speaking is much better than the other stuff, what you get then is a sort of faux authenticity develop which in turn will have to be mocked by you and so we shall go around in circles.

Mr Parris: Yes. We are already.

Q59 Chairman: A bleak conclusion.
Ms Clair: But that is for the internal. Our concern really is about public information and what people understand.
Chairman: Yes, of course. Thank you stakeholders. I think we have had a meaningful interaction. Thank you very much indeed for all your time this morning.

Memorandum from Rt Hon David Blunkett MP

RE: INQUIRY INTO OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Thanks for the circular in relation to the "language" used by the Civil Service.

We're looking out some classic letters—although we will obviously have to eliminate names of both the constituent and also the Minister (in order to avoid complete embarrassment).

There is of course, some entertaining language which you'll have come across. The Civil Service always use the term "delighted" for just about anything that Ministers are asked to do—which completely takes away any meaning for the word at all! I used to eliminate it from all my letters and reports.

They also have wonderful phrases like "stand ready" which actually means we're doing nothing about this unless we're absolutely forced to do so!

April 2009

Memorandum from Will Cooper

In response to Tony Wright's request in today's Guardian for examples of "bad language" from the public sector, I'd like to nominate the entire lexicon surrounding the Private Finance Initiative (which in itself would be better described as part-privatisation).

I understand that the subject is a complex one that requires its own internal lingo, but I feel strongly that the public simply don't know what it is, let alone understand the political principles underlying it, largely because the language used to describe its workings is so eye-wateringly arcane. I would even venture to suggest that this may be one of the prime objectives of PFI; some of the terminology is purposefully euphemistic, the upshot being that the public have neither the confidence nor the understanding to question its mechanics or its prevalence. The result is that, just as the financial figures for PFI are off the balance-sheet, so are the principles behind it, masked by endless layers of meaningless verbiage.

Any documents to which the public have access on this subject should, in my opinion, be vastly simplified. This includes documents available to, but not targeted specifically at, the public, since often viewing these is the only way one can glean detailed information about what is going on with PFI.

A few examples:

"public-private partnerships"—implies, I think, that the public sector has a far more central role in running PFI projects than it actually does;

"the Third Way"—ambiguous, hazy and (I suspect) designed to stifle further conversation since it presumes everyone knows what it's supposed to represent;

"identify additional capital resources"—spend more taxpayers' money;

"significant capital expenditure"—a lot of taxpayers' money;

"independent sector involvement in the provision of public services"—private companies will run our hospitals and schools;

"modernisation programme"—back-door privatisation;

"increased PFI deal flow"—more privatisation, and faster;

"PFI credits"—money from central government to allow them to purchase services from the private sector that they wouldn't get otherwise;

"lower revenue expenditure"; "increased efficiency"—cost-cutting;

"conventional procurement"—ie non-privatised public-sector projects;

"risk transfer strategy"—measures to ensure that the public won't lose out should the project collapse;

"infrastructure support solutions"; "facilities management services"—pay us to run your council/ school/hospital for you;

"SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle)"—a company created solely to allow a PFI project to go ahead;

"DBFO (Design, Build, Finance, Operate) schemes"—in which complete control of every aspect of a (supposedly) public building is given to a private contractor; and

"optimism bias"—unblinkingly accepting the notion that the lowest cost outcome is inherently the most desirable;

One sample from the Treasury's news pages (the first paragraph is nigh indecipherable to the average member of the public) is appended to this memorandum.

The language surrounding the move to PFI has inevitably contributed to the fact that those of us who use public services (ie all of us) are being "rebranded" from citizens or residents to "customers". This implies some kind of cosy business arrangement between us and our public bodies, when actually the emphasis should be on statutory duty. Rather than building schools, hospitals and leisure centres we now "procure projects" in a way that emphasises a business venture aimed at profit, rather than the state's responsibility for public welfare. It has also resulted in a complete lack of transparency—to get to the bottom of what PFI is and means requires a lot of painstaking research, when the facts should be there in plain English so we can decide whether or not we agree with them. I am sure you have detected a general political bias against PFI in my argument here, which I freely declare; but I hope you will also recognise that the sort of language used on this subject prohibits the public from forming any opinion on the scheme, one way or the other.

April 2009

APPENDIX

HM TREASURY PRESS RELEASE—14 JULY 1999

TREASURY TASKFORCE PFI STANDARD CONTRACT GUIDANCE LAUNCHED

A platform for generating increased Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deal flow and reducing the costs of tendering will be the outcome of new contract guidelines published by the Treasury Taskforce, Chief Secretary to the Treasury Alan Milburn said today.

The new contract guidelines will act as a blueprint for the future development of PFI and ensure that future PFI contracts across different public services will be able to follow a consistent approach by incorporating standard conditions into the contracts.

Mr Milburn said:

"Consultation with hundreds of interested parties has produced guidance which provides the public sector with a practical toolkit for delivering the very best value to the taxpayer. The guidance will avoid the pitfalls of the past—where the public sector, let alone those in the private sector, have had to re-invent the wheel at considerable expense every time a hospital or a college entered into a PFI arrangement.

"The challenge for both the public and the private sectors—now that the road is clear—is to expand the PFI. We want to see more deals done. We want to see PFI working in sectors like further education where it has not worked before. And we want to see it making an even greater contribution to producing modern public services that are shaped around the needs of the public.

"We must now use the PFI to drive forward the Government's modernisation programme for our public services. We do not want to see business as usual in our public services. We want to see change for the better. The PFI is part and parcel of that change process."

The Treasury Taskforce contract standardisation guidance marks the end of two years work involving consultation with literally hundreds of stakeholders. The contract standardisation guidance has already commanded a great deal of positive comment in the market.

Memorandum from Paul Flynn MP, Member of the Committee

INTRODUCTION

The use of jargon—bad language—in business and politics is nothing new. John Betjeman nailed it in his poem *Executive*:

You ask me what it is I do. Well, actually, you know,
I'm partly a liaison man, and partly P.R.O.
Essentially, I integrate the current export drive
And basically I'm viable from ten o'clock till five.

But with the advent of new Labour, the tendency towards using jargon has proliferated exponentially to the point that official communications are now largely incomprehensible. If we take **Best Practice**, as an example, this phrase now appears as a matter of course in policy documents, regulation, legislation and guidelines for almost every conceivable situation. A blog recently commentated:

> According to the Wikipedia, *Best Practice* is a management idea which asserts that there is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive or reward that is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a project can be rolled out and completed with fewer problems and unforeseen complications.

Yes, just as you and I suspected, it's yet another form of modernspeak designed to state the obvious, and give those stating the obvious an air of undeserved authority. It has found its way into both political and management jargon, and it is completely meaningless.

Would anyone knowingly pursue the route of worst practice?

In 2001 the Government introduced legislation designed "to enable provision to be made for the purpose of reforming legislation which has the effect of imposing burdens affecting persons in the carrying on of any activity and to enable codes of practice to be made with respect to the enforcement of restrictions, requirements or conditions."

The problem with the legislation is that it was so infested with the jargon of regulation that it was virtually incomprehensible to anyone but the parliamentary draughtsmen who wrote it (perhaps not even to them) and in 2006 the Act was repealed by the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act.

Not content with fouling up the English language the practitioners then decided to rename the DTI the BERR—the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. The BERR Website announces:

IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF REGULATORS

— A Code of Practice for national and local regulators was passed by Parliament on 26 November 2007 and will come in to force in April 2008. This makes it legally binding that regulators ensure inspection and enforcement is efficient, both for the regulators themselves and those they regulate.

— To assess how regulators are performing in delivering proportionate enforcement to ensure compliance, the Better Regulation Executive has worked with the National Audit Office and regulators to develop a review framework published in May 2007. Five major regulators have been reviewed—the Health and Safety Executive, Food Standards Agency, Financial Services Authority, the Environment Agency and the Office of Fair Trading. Reports on each of the regulators will be published in February 2008 . . .

— The Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Bill was introduced to Parliament in November 2007, and if passed, will modernise the penalty regimes which regulators use by giving them access to flexible, efficient and proportionate administrative sanctions.

The following extracts from the House of Commons Business Plan 2008-09 show how the use of meaningless official language has infiltrated the Commons itself.

House of Commons Business Plan 2008-09 is produced by the Office of the Chief Executive (OCE).

The Chief Executive and Clerk of the House is Dr Malcolm Jack.

Extract 1

This extract from the Business Plan concerns planning for "business resilience" and "risk management" within the House (that is to say how well the House is protected from a terrorist or other attack and how it could continue after such an attack).

3.5 *Objective 5*

To ensure that good practice in risk management and business resilience planning is embedded across the House Service.

Business areas concerned:

3.5.1 Risk facilitation

3.5.2 Business resilience planning

3.5.3 Internal Audit

3.5.1 *Risk facilitation*

3.5.1.1 *FY 2007/08: current year progress*

This year, there has been a re-focus on enhancing risk management activities within the House. The aim has been to match public service standards in risk management by providing support to the Management Board in its management of risk. Progress includes:

— Regular updates on corporate risk management provided to the Management Board.

— Risk Management moved to the OCE with effect from January 2008 to strengthen the independence and authority of the risk management process.

— Assistant risk management facilitator appointed from January 2008.

— Regular review of departmental risk registers have taken place during the year; in most cases departmental risk registers have continued to develop whilst taking on board any Management Board recommendations made during the year.

3.5.1.2 *FY 2008/09: objectives*

— To gain the Management Board's approval for, and then implement, an improved risk management strategy and process, which fits the House and is in line with best practice adopted elsewhere in the public sector

MEASURES

Risk Management policy, principles and guidance to be documented, published and communicated to staff by Sept 2008.

Regular liaison with HM Treasury on a quarterly basis to ensure the risk management policy remains up to date and relevant.

— To ensure a risk management system is embedded within business processes, allowing for risks to be escalated up and down the organisation as necessary

MEASURES

Regular quarterly meetings with the corporate risk owners (Director Generals) to review risks.

Departments have up-to-date risk registers based upon functional areas, with any departmental cross-cutting risks identified.

Feedback from Departments.

Sufficient assurance is available to meet the requirements of the statement of internal control (SIC) for the Administration Account.

Risk management to be included within the various management training programmes by September 2008.

Satisfactory outcome of next internal audit of risk management in 2009/10.

3.5.1.3 *FY 2008/09: work planned*

— Risk management process: to continue to develop the House risk management system ensuring that processes are in place for risks to be actively managed and escalated as appropriate through the organisation.

— Facilitator: to continue to actively support the Management Board and departments in their risk management process.

— Risk management policy statement/document: ensure the House has a published risk management policy document.

— Communication: to communicate RM policy to key stakeholders via risk "roadshows", intranet, user friendly guides etc.

— Corporate risk review: undertake a review of current corporate risks to ensure they remain relevant in light of the recent changes in corporate strategy with particular focus on corporate risk 4 relating to organisational and cultural change.

— Linking corporate & departmental risk management process: draw closer linkages between corporate and departmental risk management registers; ensuring local departmental/operational risks are identified as well as corporate related risks.

— Departmental risk registers 08/09: Re-align risk registers to reflect the new unified structure, ensure any management action identified is "SMART", link in with performance measurements. Simplify reporting and monitoring of risks by using risk heat maps to provide a quick visual summary of the critical risks faced by a department.

— Embed risk management: to ensure that risk management is a fully integrated part of business planning and performance management within the new organisational structure.

3.5.2 *Business Resilience Planning*

3.5.2.1 *FY 2007/08 progress*

— Business Continuity project officer appointed to facilitate creation of standard Parliament-wide Business Continuity plans adaptable to a range of likely contingencies. The work has concentrated on "sub disaster risks" such as the loss of all or part of any building, denial of normal office facilities or staff. Work by the Serjeant-at-Arms on disaster Recovery planning has continued in parallel.

— The establishment of a Parliamentary Business Continuity Policy Steering Group chaired by the Clerk of the Journals, House of Commons.

— Preparation of twenty eight departmental Business Continuity plans, in standard format, which will be taken forward in 2008/09 for further iterations and rehearsals.

— Appointment of a part time consultant to assist in the BC process and a further appointment of a consultancy firm to validate work to date and assist in the delivery of 2008/09 objectives.

3.5.2.2 *FY 2008/09 objectives.*

— To ensure that departmental business continuity plans are prepared to a recognised standard, reflect best practice and are consistent across Parliament, with a disciplined and effective update process.

3.6.1.2 *FY 2008/09: objectives*

— To deliver systematic review and evaluation of risk management, control and governance through the annual risk based audit programme, in order to give assurance to the Clerk as Accounting Officer, Management Board and Audit Committees on the management of risk and the effectiveness of internal controls and governance processes.

MEASURE

Delivery of the audit plan (completion of 90% agreed audits in audit plan, to draft report stage).

Extract 2

This second extract concerns "internal audit" of "the business". What the business is is not clear.

To add value to the organisation through the Internal Audit process, ensuring the Audit Plan meets the needs of the business and is based on risk

MEASURES

60% of audit hours spent on high risk areas as agreed and documented in the audit plan.

Agreement of audit committees and Management Board to the audit plan, before start of Audit plan year.

Greater than 70% positive response in client satisfaction interviews.

3.6.1.3 *FY 2008/09: work planned*

The IAU has already agreed a basis for cooperative working on assurance of services shared with the House of Lords. There is also a new desire on the part of the National Audit Office (NAO) to work more closely with internal audit which has been launched by the joint planning of future audit activities. This will mean information will be shared to a greater extent than hitherto and should enable each assurance partner to rely on the work of the other.

Internally we are working with the new Parliamentary Director of Estates to establish links between his directorate and internal audit. The objective is for project governance to include an assurance role covering time, quality and cost. In this way the IAU will, in due course, receive assurance on individual major projects and collective assurance on minor projects.

The concept could also be applied to other areas such as IT, but first there needs to be confidence that the new approach will be thorough, independent and objective. If this can be achieved the IAU will create a library of project assurance evidence that it will use in formulating an overall opinion on project controls. This approach could provide a more efficient way of gathering project assurance evidence, enable a broader coverage of project risks and redirect internal audit review work from the projects themselves to the evidence gathering processes.

The concept of the IAU gathering evidence from other assurance providers forms the foundation of a model for internal audit's future development as it is presently envisaged. The model assumes that internal audit will collect and take account of a wide range of assurance evidence in formulating opinions on internal controls on an enterprise wide and category basis, for example on governance, projects and financial management.

Looking ahead: The medium and longer term

On the Members' side there is a clear and growing pressure for more transparency and tighter controls on allowances that could further impact on the scope and governance of internal audit as well as its relationship with Members.

On the Administration side there is an optimism that the new structure will enable better services to be provided to Members. In parallel the initiatives to improve and professionalise management will demand a more systematic and risk based approach to internal audit combined with an increased need for flexibility to respond to changing priorities and emerging risks. To facilitate this internal audit will need to have closer relations with decision making bodies and better information about projects and initiatives. In return IA will have to provide clear advice and opinion and new ways of communicating these to senior management groups.

Internal audit is also working very closely with the risk facilitators to ensure that the development of new risk management processes and internal audit develop in harmony.

April 2009

———————————

Memorandum from Roger Gale MP

INQUIRY INTO OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

The accompanying Health Authority leaflet epitomises, I think, the worst of both Government initiatives and language!

I see small point in selecting a particular phrase from this document which is total in its awfulness!

With my best wishes.

April 2009

APPENDIX

EXTRACTS OF LETTER FROM DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH TO ROGER GALE MP

PACESETTERS PROGRAMME—LOCAL NHS TRUSTS

I am writing to inform you that Eastern & Coastal Kent PCT in your constituency is participating in a Department of Health led initiative called Pacesetters.

Pacesetters aims to tackle inequalities in health services and in the workplace arising out of discrimination and disadvantage. The programme is founded on a robust evidence base and evaluation strategy. Its projects are developed through co-design with communities and delivered through a service improvement methodology. (See Overview for further details.) It is important to emphasise that the methodology is based on testing new approaches on a small scale to identify what works and what does not work.

18 Trusts across six Strategic Health Authorities participated in the first wave. Some example(s) are attached:

1. Local example(s) from your area.
2. Overview of the Pacesetters programme for Wave 2 sites.
3. Frequently Asked Questions.
4. Selection criteria and application form for Wave 2 sites.
5. Wave 2 Matrix of Change Ideas.

We anticipate that most interventions worked on will be for a period of one year after which successful innovations will be mainstreamed into the work of the trusts and spread nationally. This will ensure long-term sustainability of equality and diversity into core business.

EXAMPLE(S) OF IMPROVEMENT STORIES FROM YOUR REGION

Spiritual needs assessment project

Surrey and Borders Partnership Foundation Trust

The Spiritual Needs Assessment project at the Abraham Cowley Unit in Chertsey is focusing on developing a Spiritual Needs Assessment process so that mental health services can more effectively respond to the spiritual and religious needs of service users. This project is not only focused on faith but includes non-believers and people with interests that have a significant influence on their lives.

The team have begun to roll out Spiritual Needs Assessment on one ward and two members of nursing staff have been trained to use the assessment tool and form. Work is also being carried out to improve the design of the "tool" for the spiritual needs assessment. Workshops and training sessions have been held for hospital staff and faith practitioners to raise awareness of the tool. The project lead has given presentations to other staff to encourage its wider use and adoption. An important objective for the project was to include Spiritual/cultural needs as a separate section the new CPA; this has now been achieved.

Participation and engagement

Community participation is a significant element of the programme. SHAs and their Trusts work in partnership with local populations, patients and service users to design innovative models of community participation. (Each Wave 2 site will link with an original Pacesetters site in their area in order to learn about the processes of being involved in Pacesetters).

International Faculty

As part of the programme, an International Advisory Faculty has been established, comprising a group of international advisors who offer leading-edge thinking across the six equality strands. One of their key roles is to identify innovative solutions currently in place in other countries that are having a positive impact to intractable problems in relation to health inequalities and the six equality strands. Four International Faculty events have been held on topics such as community engagement, disability and race.

Evaluation

It is essential that the programme aims, and innovations in each SHA and trust, are evaluated so that outcomes can be identified and lessons learnt. It is also important that the service improvement methodology underpinning the programme is evaluated. Each SHA has appointed an evaluation team to evaluate the local changes in its area. DH has also appointed a research programme manager to manage a robust overall evaluation.

SELECTION CRITERIA AND RATIONALE FOR PROPOSED SITES

We expect interested NHS organisations that want to participate in the Programme to demonstrate how they fulfill the following essential and desirable criteria:

Essential Elements

— *Community Involvement and Participation:* Pacesetters is a programme that is founded on meaningful community engagement. NHS organisations need to demonstrate what process they have in place or are planning to develop to engage with the widest community demographics as possible. They need to demonstrate how this engagement is or will be, shaping their policies and services.

— *Trust Board Commitment:* It is expected that the participating NHS organisation will nominate a Pacesetter lead at Executive Director Level to assist in both the delivery and dissemination of the programme internally and externally and link it to the mainstream business of the organisation.

— *Partnership working:* We are looking for NHS organisations that can show positive partnership working practices and behaviours with its diverse communities, the Department of Health, local NHS and the community and voluntary sector stakeholders.

— *Legal compliance:* Pacesetter sites will also be expected to work comprehensively towards achieving equality and diversity legal compliance

— *Current Equality and Diversity Position:* Pacesetter sites should reflect a broad spectrum of progress across the six equality strands. Sites may be a mix of those organisations that are committed to the agenda and/or have already made some progress or those that are struggling but are committed to the equality agenda.

Desirable Elements

— Buddying Process: To engage a wider audience, spread the learning and increase capacity of the programme, other NHS organisations will be encouraged to shadow and work with participating sites It will be particularly useful if an interested Trust is able to suggest or identify possible partnership with another NHS "buddy" site or already have these arrangements in place.

————————————

Memorandum from Andrew George MP

Thank you for your letter of 1st April and I apologise for the delay in replying.

I think we have the right to expect the Information Commissioner's Office to set the highest standards in communication and information.

However, I enclose a copy of a recent exchange of correspondence with them which I believe illustrates a problem of formulaic letter construction.

I am sure that others can provide for you plenty of examples from the Department for Work and Pensions which more often than not leave our constituents goggle-eyed and with a sore head!

Hope this helps.

May 2009

APPENDIX 1

LETTER FROM ANDREW GEORGE MP TO THE INFORMATION COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE, 20 JANUARY 2009

Thank you for your letter of 14 January 2009.

Am I the only person confused by the style of this letter? You first refer to information you require to "progress your complaint". In the next sentence you tell me that "your case has now been closed" and in the following sentence you tell me that "your complaint can be reopened".

You may wish to review whether you are being drawn in to gobbledegook!

The information you request is enclosed.

APPENDIX 2

LETTER FROM THE INFORMATION COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE TO ANDREW GEORGE MP, 14 JANUARY 2009

Information request to Ministry of Justice (MOJ).

Thank you for your correspondence dated 12 December 2008 in which you complain about the response you received from MOJ.

So we can progress your complaint we need you to provide copies of the following:

— Your initial request for information to MOJ.

Your case has now been closed as there is no further action we are able to take without the documents we have requested. We require these documents as:

— It provides us with a full set of unedited evidence in support of the complaint.

— It is necessary to provide a copy of the initial request to the public authority when we first notify them of having received a complaint.

Once we receive the information we have requested your complaint can be reopened.

Please quote the reference number on the top of this letter in any further correspondence.

————————————

Memorandum from Paul Goodman MP

Thank you for your letter of 1 April about the Public Administration Select Committee's inquiry into official language.

I attach a copy of a letter that the Speaker received from Hazel Blears, the Communities Secretary, in answer to persistent queries that I'd raised in correspondence and on the floor of the House about how exactly this year's allocation of £12 million of Preventing Violence Extremism money is being spent. You'll see that the third paragraph of the Secretary of State's letter appears to say that the department has no record, but is now compiling one.

I offer her letter to the select committee as a particularly bad example of official language—though it was an example, presumably, from the point of view of Sir Humphrey.

April 2009

APPENDIX

LETTER FROM RT HON HAZEL BLEARS MP TO SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE, MARCH 2009

I wanted to write to you to follow up the point of order raised by Paul Goodman on 11 March, concerning responses to the correspondence about funding to prevent violent extremism.

Paul Goodman wrote to me on 15 January noting that we had previously provided him with information about the Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund in Spring 2008 and asking for corresponding details for the current period. I replied on 3 March, noting that the Pathfinder Fund had existed in 2007–08 and that funding was now provided through the Area Based Grant—a non ring-fenced grant fund which allows local authorities to decide the most effective and efficient routes to invest their resources for the delivery of local priorities. Copies of the correspondence and relevant PQs are enclosed.[1]

Because of this change it is not possible for me to provide a list of funded projects in precisely the same format as in Spring 2008. However, we have been working closely with Government Offices, the Office for Security and Counter-terrorism and with our local partners to deliver this agenda and to collate information setting out progress on the development of local partnerships and action plans. This includes information on engagement, including detail about which community groups are funded for leading local projects.

I am, of course, content to share the information set out above. I believe it would make sense to do so after the end of the financial year and will therefore write to him around the end of April providing this detail. I hope he finds this helpful.

I am also happy to build on the briefing he received from Sadiq Khan MP and officials recently, which touched on this issue, by meeting him again to provide further explanation of the local government finance system and the local government performance framework.

A copy of this letter goes to Paul Goodman MP and the Leader of the House of Commons.

───────────────

Memorandum from Andrew Miller MP

RE: INQUIRY INTO OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Thank you for your letter of 1st April. I enclose a copy of the phrase that was used in a response to me regarding a constituent from the CSA; this left us both at a loss from what was expected of my constituent.

As you can see the top is headed "our questions"; which of the statements do you think constitute a question?!

April 2009

APPENDIX

LETTER FROM THE CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY TO ANDREW MILLER MP'S CONSTITUENT

OUR QUESTIONS

We originally asked you for details of your income in our latest letter dated 19/08/08. Our records show that we received a letter and also a wage slip from your partner. Unfortunately this information appears to have gone astray.

To ensure progress of the change of circumstance review I contacted your employer and requested wage details for weeks 18/07/08 to 15/08/08 inclusive, I also contacted your partner's employer and requested income details for August and September 2008. This income information for you and your partner covers the relevant week of this assessment which is 11/08/08—17/08/08.

The information has now been returned and shows that you had an average income of £337.42 after deductions for tax, national insurance and half of the weekly pension contributions you make. All 5 weeks details included overtime and therefore is considered regular income.

During conversations with yourself you intimated that your income was lower than this, to ensure that you receive a correct assessment please supply wage slips showing the reduction in your income that you referred to. You will need to send five consecutive wage slips from when your income reduced after the period advised of above.

If you have any queries regarding this please feel free to contact me on the above number between 08.00 and 16.00 Monday to Friday until 17/04/09.

───────────────

[1]   Not printed.

Failure to provide the above information will result in an assessment being completed using the above net income and not taking into consideration any reduction in net income that may have since occurred.

———————————

Memorandum from Philip Morgan

I have today (1 May) heard via the Local Government Association (LGA), the Hampshire CC and my charity work of your brave expedition into the jungle of jargon. So I'm a day late in responding. But I have something vital to say.

The LGA seem to have got lost in the jungle very quickly indeed!! Their contribution is muddled in the extreme.

Here are some words they are suggesting councils don't use because they are jargon: taxonomy, re-baselining, mainstreaming, holistic governance, contestability, predictors of beaconicity, synergies. (Source: HCC Hampshire Children's Trust Newsletter, Spring 2009)

This list shows a clear failure to understand what jargon is.

The list consists of perfectly good and acceptable English words that most people don't know PLUS invented words or phrases which people outside the loop can't be expected to understand. In other words, the list consists of English words and jargon. It is not a list solely of jargon.

It probably doesn't even include all the main types of jargon anyway!! A major cause of jargon is where the meaning of a perfectly ordinary and clear English word is changed to some different and special meaning that nobody else understands—and which of course laymen try to understand in its normal dictionary meaning. As I've not had time to think about this subject properly I can only think of one example: In March Hampshire CC produced a young carers strategy and action plan. I asked a military man and my dictionary what a strategy is; it is a "Plan of Action" . So HCC have just published simultaneously in the same binding a Plan of Action and an Action Plan. The strategy is not a strategy anyway: so the two parts of the document appear to be different. But clearly, the normal English word "strategy" with a perfectly clear meaning has been used to mean something else, without anybody noticing. This is probably the worst type of jargon, as you rightly assume you understand what is being said, but in fact you don't!

At least with "governance" you know you're up against a new word, in fact a dictionary word, but little used and with the same meaning as government. When you try hard and can't distinguish its meaning from "government", you know you're into jargon! I'd be interested to know if you can explain the difference—especially as you're one of the wisest people in Parliament! (I know flattery gets you nowhere—but I do have a high regard for your views and judgement.)

I hope this helps, but it seems absolutely clear that the LGA doesn't understand the subject. They're even trying to get people to play jargon bingo—how trite—talk about the blind leading the blind!

My sudden contact with this subject tells me that the same intellectual failure that produces jargon is being applied to a vain attempt to remove it!! I know you will bring some sense to it all!

Bon courage!

May 2009

———————————

Memorandum from the Simplification Centre

INTRODUCTION

As a research centre addressing the problem of over-complex information, we welcome your inquiry into official language.

We don't believe you will be short of examples of jargon, so instead of providing more, we would like to draw attention to some wider issues such as the causes and costs of poor communication.

DIFFERENT SORTS OF JARGON

Official language (like other sorts of writing) can suffer from jargon and difficulty for various reasons:

— technical terms used to communicate to a non-technical public;

— familiar words, misunderstood because they are being used in a specialised sense;

— a long, rarer (usually Latin-based) word used where a short, familiar (usually Anglo-Saxon-based) word would do just as well;

— euphemisms designed to avoid blunt references to difficult subjects;

— worn out clichés (especially management ones) which irritate, even if we know perfectly well what they mean;

— long sentences with complex structures, so that we've forgotten the beginning by the time we reach the end;

— poorly structured text—such as when concepts are explained in a different part of the document from where they are used;

— documents that become bloated because they attempt to cover all circumstances; and

— lack of visual design to help people understand the structure of a document and read it strategically.

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF JARGON

Although good documents often look as if they were easy to write, clear writing is actually a highly skilled task. Government employs a large number of communications specialists, but traditionally defines communications largely in terms of either media relations or public information campaigns. Things like forms, guidance, and financial statements are the communications that actually deliver services to individual citizens, but they are usually the responsibility of operational departments.

THE NEED FOR SKILLS

In our experience, the people who have the job of writing public information documents are often untrained, or minimally trained, and little relevant training is actually available to them. Information writers often work at a junior level and do not feel able to challenge text written by senior people, and legal specialists in particular. In some cases, information documents intended for the public have to include forms of words that come directly from legislation.

THE COST OF POOR INFORMATION

Poorly designed information is enormously costly—error-prone forms have to be returned and corrected, and needless enquiries are made to government helplines. These costs are rarely addressed in reviews of potential savings, but we believe they are considerable. So investing in document design, training and user-testing is well worthwhile.

We hope that by highlighting good as well as bad examples of official language the Committee will be successful in sparking a debate on how to raise standards further. We would welcome the opportunity to be a part of that debate.

ABOUT THE SIMPLIFICATION CENTRE

The Simplification Centre is a new research centre established at the University of Reading, funded by the university and by member organisations (typically government departments, and large financial services companies). It is staffed by people who have combined careers in research and practice, with many years of experience in simplifying and testing information documents.

You can find more information about the Centre at www.reading.ac.uk/simplification. We run a research programme, and offer our members services that include document appraisal, training and seminars.

April 2009

———————

Memorandum from Alex Stobart

I read your request in the *Guardian* following an article by Andrew Sparrow. Unfortunately his e-mail address is not easy to find.

The government writing I find difficulty is where I live in Edinburgh. There is a City Literacy and Numeracy Partnership in the city called CLAN.

Their services are offered to some of the 36% of men and 39% of women in Scotland who have difficulties reading and writing.

However the booklet that describes the services is nearly 90 pages long, and full of the most difficult words you will ever see (thus in my opinion alienating their audience straightaway).

April 2009

———————

Memorandum from Richard Taylor

I am writing in response to your call for examples of the Government's poor use of language.

I would like to draw your attention to the HMRC's description of their online forms for self assessment taxation as software:

http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/sa/software.htm[2]

I feel that the use of the word "software", while not technically inaccurate, suggests that software has to be downloaded and run on the users' computer. This confusion is amplified by the fact that the HMRC directly compare their "software", which is in reality an online form, with commercial software which has to be purchased and installed on the users' computer.

One cannot easily find out that the HMRC "software" is in fact simply an online form until after signing up for the service.

I believe that if this was corrected then more people would fill in their self-assessment tax forms online, which ought, assuming rational systems being in place, reduce the costs of collecting tax. I have written to the HMRC many times on this point. I have never had a reply, but they have on occasion started using the term "online software" perhaps as a minor, insufficient, effort to act on the suggestion.

Other commonly used phrases which exemplify poor use of language by the Government:

— Anti-Social Behaviour; this is too often used to refer to real crimes (such as driving scooters without helmets, licenses or insurance) as well as criminal damage. It results in such offences being unreasonably treated together with things some consider problematic such as youths gathering outside shops on their way home from school.

— Specially Trained Units; non-firearms police officers who are to be trained in the use of the TASERs they are soon to be issued with are described as "Specially Trained Units", often abbreviated to STUs. This is misleading as it suggests these officers have had more training with TASER and experience of situations where force might need to be used than is the case. STUs are individual normal response police officers who have been issued a TASER and given a few hours training on its use.

— Laid before Parliament; this process is not what it sounds like. Having secondary legislation "laid before Parliament" does not mean it is discussed, debated and approved by both houses of Parliament. Often government ministers and departments imply that is what it does mean, and this is very misleading. In practice though there is no debate, and "laid before Parliament" doesn't even mean published and drawn attention to on the Parliamentary website. As far as I can tell the usual procedure is for the "Merits of Statutory Instruments Committee" to determine "that the special attention of the House need not be drawn to [the secondary legislation]" which is then considered approved without debate or a vote. There does not appear to be an accessible procedure for MPs to force a debate and vote.

— Regional Assembly; suggests a body of elected individuals, however many members are unelected.

— Television Licence; "Television Licences" are required for all equipment capable of watching live TV, this now includes many computers, mobile phones and other devices so the term is now out of line with technology.

— Investment; the Government far too often uses the term "Investment" when in-fact what is being described is spending.

March 2009

APPENDIX

HMRC "SOFTWARE YOU CAN USE FOR YOUR TAX RETURN" WEBPAGE

Software you Can Use for your Tax Return

When you file online your figures are calculated automatically and you'll know right away what you owe or what is owed to you. You can use our free Self Assessment Online software or commercial software (some are also free). Some supplementary pages aren't supported by our service, but are provided by commercial software.

— What's covered by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) free, online service.

— What's covered by commercial software.

— Filing trust and estate returns online.

— Completing your online tax return in parts.

— Before you can send us your tax return online.

---

[2]   See appendix.

— Tax returns you can't file online.

— HMRC online support.

WHAT'S COVERED BY HM REVENUE & CUSTOMS (HMRC) FREE, ONLINE SERVICE

You can send us the main Self Assessment Tax Return (SA100) online free of charge using our online service. You can also file the following supplementary pages online now:

— Employment.

— Self-employment.

— Individual partnership—to report your share of a partnership's profit or loss.

— UK property.

— Capital Gains.

— Foreign.

As well as sending your tax return online you can view and/or amend your contact details online and use a secure email channel to ask us a question (see "HMRC online support" below). You can also see your latest Statement of Account and account history online to find out:

— what you owe, what you've paid and any repayments due;

— when your tax return was received; and

— when your next tax return is due.

Bear in mind that our software only offers the supplementary pages listed above. If you want to send other pages online you'll need to use commercial software (see "What's covered by commercial software" below).

HMRC's Self Assessment online filing service—find out more about the benefits and how to register

WHAT'S COVERED BY COMMERCIAL SOFTWARE

You can file the following tax returns online using software from commercial suppliers (some of this software is free and some you have to pay for):

— SA100—Individual Tax Return (also completed if you're self-employed).

— SA800—The Partnership Tax Return.

— SA900—The Trust and Estate Tax Return (see "Filing trust and estate returns online" below).

The commercial software products also allow you to file some or all of the following supplementary pages online:

— Employment.

— Self-employment.

— Individual partnership.

— UK property.

— Additional information.

— Foreign income.

— Trust income.

— Capital Gains.

— Non-residence.

— Minister of religion.

— Lloyd's underwriters.

Follow the link below for a list of commercial software that we have tested and that is compatible with our Self Assessment online filing service. We don't recommend any one particular product or service over another, so you'll have to choose for yourself. When you compare suppliers, you could look at things such as their extra features, ease of use and quality of support.

List of commercial software compatible with Self Assessment online

Filing Trust and Estate Returns Online

The system for filing trust and estate returns online is slightly different from other methods of Self Assessment online. Find out more by following the link below.

The Trust and Estate Tax Return: paper or online

Completing your Online Tax Return in Parts

You don't have to fill in your online tax return all in one go. You can fill in part of it then save it and come back later. You can also print it out if you want to.

If you use HMRC software, your work is saved securely on our system. Only you will be able to get at it, no one else (inside or outside HMRC) can look at your return until you've submitted it.

If you use commercial software, you may be able to save your work on your own computer. If this feature's important to you, check that it's available before you choose your software.

Before you can Send us your Tax Return Online

Whichever software you choose, before you can send us your tax return online, you'll need to register and enrol to use the online service—allow at least seven days to do this. You'll need to have your Unique Taxpayer Reference (UTR) to hand (find this on your tax return or Statement of Account) plus either your National Insurance number or your postcode.

For full details please see our article "Self Assessment Online". If you wish to register and enrol now you can use the link below.

Self Assessment Online—find out more about the benefits and how to register

Self Assessment online—register and enrol now

Tax Returns you Can't File Online

There is currently no software available for filing the following returns:

— SA700—Non-resident Company Tax Return.

— SA970—Trustees of Registered Pension Schemes.

You have to send us these as paper returns. Because there is no online service available, the deadline for these paper returns is the same as for online returns—31 January.

Self assessment deadlines—find out more

Self Assessment for trustees of registered pensions schemes

HMRC Online Support

The Online Services Helpdesk supports HMRC's software (but not software from other suppliers). You can contact the helpdesk by phone on 0845 6055 999 or by minicom on 0845 366 7805. It is open seven days a week from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm (closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day). You can also contact the helpdesk by email at the address below:

helpdesk@ir-efile.gov.uk

———————————

Memorandum from Phil Willis MP

I am pleased to hear that the Public Administration Select Committee is currently investigating the Government's use of language. This is an issue that my committee also feels strongly about. As such, I have enclosed a copy of the DIUS Annual Report 2008, which we felt was a prime example of the misuse of language, and the IUSS committee's corresponding report.[3] I hope you find this useful.

April 2009

———————————

[3] Not printed. Documents available at:
http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/~/media/publications/2/21390%20AIR%20Report%20AW%20Complete and
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/51/51i.pdf