

WORDS

Language is very important. For example, success was guaranteed for the endeavours of the Nicaraguan “Contras” when Reagan was allowed to call them, with grotesque inappropriateness, “freedom fighters”.

Labour will not overtake the Tories by accepting, explicitly or implicitly, the Tory view of the world. They accept their outlook implicitly if they accept uncritically the words they use to describe it. Those words are loaded and potentially poisonous.

As my old Dad would have said, you cannot overtake a car by driving in the same lane.

The taxpayer. It has recently become usual to refer to national assets as being owned by “the taxpayer”. They are not: they are owned by the nation. To ascribe them to the taxpayer is not only inaccurate by also intentionally divisive and deeply offensive. It supports the Tory assault on the non-existent non-taxpayer, who is implicitly some kind of freeloader or scrounger. So why does the non-Tory press, and even Labour politicians, fall into the trap of using the term so freely?

It is slightly more accurate to say that national assets are owned by the government, which technically they are, but only on behalf of, and in trust for, the nation (whatever that is).

Similarly government payments are not made by the taxpayer. The only thing the taxpayer pays is taxes! Government payments are made by the government on behalf of, and preferably for the benefit of, the nation.

Austerity. When we see the effects of what the Tories call “austerity” we are driven to be “anti-austerity”. But how can we be? Austerity is by definition A Good Thing! That is why the Tories chose the word. It is, on the surface, merely a call for responsible financial management, and in particular for not spending money needlessly. How could we possibly object to that?

It is the Cameron/Osborne version of austerity that is objectionable. So when we oppose the government's vicious assault on the poor and helpless let us call it that, and not use the Tory word for it. Or perhaps call it “Osterity”?

And let us instead enthusiastically advocate austerity, responsible financial management and honest accounting: engage them on their own ground and not let them dismiss Labour as the party of irresponsible spending.

To which end we should broaden the debate beyond just the Tories' cuts to essential services and to welfare, and point out some of the significant respects in which their government squanders the nation's resources.

The deficit. The government needs to balance its books, of course, but the Tories go beyond that and claim that the overriding need of the nation at present is to eliminate “the deficit”. However, apart from the fact that what they have done has not succeeded in doing so, and arguably could not possibly have, they even cheat on the terminology. “The deficit” used to be “the fiscal deficit”, the amount by which its expenditure exceeds its tax revenue. But now the Tories use it to mean the cash deficit, and are thus able to claim that selling national assets reduces the deficit. But this is dishonest accounting: turning cashable assets into cash does

not make us any better off. Indeed, if those assets are sold at a discount, which for various illegitimate reasons the Tories are wont to do, then it makes us worse off: it actually increases the nett national debt.

Deficit cuts. Some people, even in respectable newspapers, occasionally refer to the Osborne cuts as “deficit cuts”. This is wrong. The cuts do not reduce the deficit: they have not done so and arguably could not do so. For example, the government does indeed reduce part of its expenditure by sacking a few hundred civil servants. But how big is the nett saving, if any? Such a cut directly increases overall unemployment, and thus increases benefit payments, it probably reduces average pay, and thus increases low pay benefits, and reduces income tax receipts. It reduces spending power, thus reducing VAT receipts, reducing retailer profits and thus corporation tax, possibly even increasing business closures and thus incurring redundancy payments and generally increasing the further costs of unemployment. Has anybody yet estimated the likely nett benefit, or cost, of all this?

Means. Mention is often made of the nation's “means”. One of the more unpleasant things seen in the last year is Cameron making a speech in front of a banner saying “A NATION LIVING WITHIN ITS MEANS”. This is a dishonest attempt to legitimise the government's obsession with “the deficit”. It deliberately confuses national prosperity with the government's own accounts. It tells that the nation is so poor that it cannot afford to feed its children, to house its destitute, to care for its sick. Which is disgracefully, wickedly untrue.

Growth. When not telling lies about his “austerity” Osborne extols the virtue of the economic growth he has largely failed to give us. And growth, as measured by GDP, is generally¹ deemed to be a Good Thing, even though nobody is quite clear just what it is.

Is it true that GDP now includes an assessment of the value of trade in drugs and sex? It certainly omits any allowance for the economic value of the enormous range of unpaid work, such as that of volunteers, and of people caring for the old, sick and young. But it apparently does include the value of “free” services provided by government, valued at the cost of providing them. Which entails that any “efficiency savings” achieved in the name of austerity automatically reduce GDP. However the government has an easy way to have the opposite effect: if the services in question are “privatised” then they can be provided to a lower standard at a higher price, thus increasing GDP, and supposedly making us all more prosperous.

National Debt. The Tories are (rightly) concerned about “the national debt”, and dramatically portray it as a burden on future generations. But strictly speaking the national debt includes just the money borrowed by the government through the issue of securities. There is much that it does not encompass. It is not offset by the value of cashable assets held by the government, including shares in banks and in BP. It makes no allowance for the fixed assets of central government, including the very valuable buildings and land it owns. It does not cover the liabilities and assets of government-controlled agencies including the NHS and local authorities. And it certainly does not include the mountain of private and corporate and personal debt which the nation has built up. So please let us be wary of talking freely about

1 But not by the Greens

the national debt until we are presented with an honest, comprehensive and comprehensible account of the nation's financial affairs.

Nationalisation. To most Labour supporters, and to many others, “privatisation” is a dirty word. But should it be? A large range of goods and services can be provided better and more cheaply by “private” industry. Surely it is just the perverted Thatcher/Cameron/Osborne version of privatisation which is so offensive.

To most Tory supporters, and to many others, “nationalisation” is a dirty word. But should it be? A large range of goods and services can clearly and demonstrably be provided better, more safely and more cheaply by public agencies. Even so, the word is tarnished by association with the now abandoned doctrine that all services should be state controlled, and is arguably better avoided.

Let us instead of taking up doctrinaire positions on all this just have a calm Corbyn-style discussion of how best to organise the nation's affairs in the interest of its people, and in particular of the criteria to employ when deciding whether a service is better operated by a private or public agencies.

Moderates. The press like to call the many MPs opposed to Corbyn “moderates”. This is used to suggest, which they profess to believe, that he is a wild and dangerous extremist. But he is in fact one of the most moderate people in politics today. The best the rest of us seem able to do to counteract that inappropriate terminology is to call them “Blairites”. Which, in my estimation, is too moderate a counter. Perhaps, following the Nicaraguan precedent, we could try the more accurate term “Contras”: a small group of determined supporters of the old regime who will use all possible means, fair or foul, to undermine the new leadership, despite the overwhelming popular support it has been given.

Electability. Our Contras are angered at the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader. They know in their hearts that he should really be elected not by the membership as a whole but by the Labour MPs (aka the PLP or Parliamentary Labour Party), who are after all the people he is elected to lead. They believe that by discarding the insights gained by NuLabor into how to get elected he makes the party unelectable. Unfortunately, those insights are merely a vision of what you have to say to get elected, and thus reduce policy-making to the design of a product that voters will find sufficiently appealing. They are not a vision of what the country could and should be. And they have been very unsuccessful in the last two elections. Moreover, Blair got himself elected in the first place by promising explicitly to continue Tory financial and economic policies. Which tactic worked for a while, but it killed the Labour party as far as many are concerned. And the party has now again come to life. And should prove very electable indeed, if only it learns to stop using poisonous terminology to describe its policies. Our vision has to be expressed clearly, simply, positively, and without reference to any Tory language.

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