

# More than words...

by Gordon Craigie



"STICKS AND stones may break my bones but names will never harm me" – a comforting wee rhyme to hear from your parents when you were a child, but it wasn't true then and it certainly isn't now. Even at a tender age, we could only ever believe it for that specific time when our loved ones were doing their best to protect us from some childhood cruelty, making us momentarily feel better and, in a way, teaching us that we had to toughen up our emotions to defend ourselves against the hurtful words and deeds of others.

But words *are* important, they carry meaning, even in this era of "fake news" or "post-truth" – aka "lying" – as demonstrated on a daily basis by our expensively (under) educated establishment "masters". I'm thinking particularly, though not exclusively, here of the oleaginous Gove, the obsolete Rees-Mogg, and all the other over-promoted right-wing lackies serving under whoever it is that actually controls the sock-puppet (current) British Prime Minister, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson...

Since it's unlikely that any of those charlatans are going to change their behaviour any time soon – and why would they since they're getting away with it unchallenged? – it's down to all of us to consider their words carefully. Two clichés or truisms immediately spring to mind: "Question – How do you know if a politician is lying? Answer – Their lips are moving!" and "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." That second truism is actually a quote from the civil rights activist Maya Angelou, who went on to justify that claim by adding, "People know themselves much better than you do. That's why it's important to stop expecting them

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to be something other than who they are." We know that current, and previous, British Nationalist politicians and their acolytes operate on a spectrum ranging from downright lying through sheer duplicity to being economical with the truth, so it's important to pay careful attention to the words that they use. And to note how those words can change depending on whichever shape-shifting persona they decide to adopt in a specific situation...

We're spoiled for choice if we go looking for examples to illustrate the point, and I'm certain each of you will have your own particular favourites to recall here, but here's a few to kick us off:

"Once in a generation..." – we all know what's going on when this old trope is trotted out. We know it originates from a throwaway comment by Alex Salmond during the first independence referendum campaign and forms no part of either the Edinburgh Agreement, which defined the terms formally agreed between the Scottish and UK governments to enable the 2014 referendum, nor the Smith Commission Agreement which amended the Scotland Act in, partial (!), recognition of the outcome of that referendum. Those who like to throw the quote out casually as the prime justification for their opposition to a second referendum are very keen not to acknowledge those facts.

"The will of the people..." – first, a quick recap. The 2016 EU referendum, needlessly called by David Cameron to appease the lunatic fringe of his party, was legally non-binding, though Cameron promised he would honour the result. The fact that he skipped, literally, that responsibility by immediately resigning in the aftermath is another story for another day! Two years later, several aspects of the Leave campaign were found to have been illegal, particularly on spending and misuse of personal data. Now, given the referendum was non-binding and illegal behaviours on the part of the "winning" side had been proven in court, why was the result not declared invalid? And here we arrive at the nub of the Tory government's nefariousness... If the referendum *had* been binding, the result would have been annulled because of the proven illegalities. But, since the referendum was non-binding there was no obligation on the government to annul, despite the proven illegalities, so they didn't! How perverse is that? Will of the people? Aye, right – words matter!

"Divisive referendum..." – this one is a particular favourite of Baroness Ruth Davidson, wee Willie Rennie and all the other nonentity House-Jock Unionist placeholders

in Holyrood and Westminster. The dictionary definition of divisive is, "Tending to cause disagreement or hostility between people." Surely this applies to every election or football match or, indeed, any argument between two or more people? Is that it then, we should have no more elections or football matches because they're divisive? Should we make it illegal to argue? It's a ridiculous phrase to use and, hopefully, we all see through it.

There are loads of other examples we could go on with. Tories, Johnson in particular, continually deliberately misnaming the Scottish National Party by insisting it's the Scottish *Nationalist* Party in such a way as to imply something sinister about both the party and its supporters – more than half, and growing, of Scotland, by the way. Maybe he's just confused, and conflating his own minority right-wing English/British nationalist support base with the civic majority of Scotland – who knows? He certainly misses the point that nationalists in a subjugated country seeking to regain its independence are a completely different breed from nationalists in a country that has "taken back control" and is finally free of Johnny Foreigner and that nasty EU... Of course, all imperialistic types, like the Bullingdon buffoon, are also fond of throwing in the word "separatists" as yet another gratuitous insult towards independence-minded Scots instead of, say, "freedom fighters"...

So, words are important, both in the way they are used and in the way they are received, and education is key. For inspiration, we can look to a nation with much in common with Scotland, Finland. Similar population, similar northerly location (Lerwick and Helsinki have the same latitude), land border with an overbearing big neighbour... And there is much for an independent Scotland to learn from the way Finland is organised, but particularly in education. One specific initiative that the Finnish government undertook, as part of a curriculum review in 2016, was to introduce information literacy and critical thinking as a core, integrated component of the national curriculum. As the *Guardian* reported earlier this year, "The curriculum is part of a unique, broad strategy devised by the Finnish government after 2014, when the country was first targeted with fake news stories by its Russian neighbour, and the government realised it had moved into the post-fact age." The article quotes one headteacher, Kari Kivinen: "The goal is [to develop] active, responsible citizens and voters. Thinking critically, fact-checking, interpreting and evaluating all the information you receive, wherever it appears, is crucial. We've made it a core part of what we

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teach, across all subjects."

Finland has also taken steps to spread this awareness into their adult population too, and not be content with waiting a number of years for their critically-thinking young people to enter the electorate. The government has invested heavily in resources to support courses for adults and specific training for public officials. They appointed, as a member of their cabinet, a Chief Communications Specialist, Jussi Toivanen, with a remit to actually deliver the message wherever he can, including face-to-face teaching at adult education centres. In a *CNN* interview, Toivanen says, "It's not just a government problem, the whole society has been targeted. We are doing our part, but it's everyone's task to protect the Finnish democracy."

In the same *CNN* interview, Kari Kivinen adds, "What we want our students to do is ... before they like or share in the social media they think twice – who has written this? Where has it been published? Can I find the same information from another source?" One young student explains that when any of his friends share dubious memes or far-fetched articles online he always asks for the source, while another adds, "You can never be too sure." Kivinen concludes by explaining, "What we have been developing here – combining fact-checking with the critical thinking and voter literacy – is something we have seen that there is an interest in outside Finland", yet he is uncertain whether the same approach would necessarily work elsewhere, adding, "In the end ... it's difficult to export democracy." And there's a very poignant reminder that the use, and misuse, of words has a fundamental impact on democracy.



Lies on the side of a bus!

So, what then are the practical take-aways from the Finnish initiative? In some ways, elements of this modern form of critical analysis and thinking boils down to an extension of the established mantra of good journalism – who, what, where, why and when – augmented by specific skills relevant to the digital age. As Kari Kivinen said in his *Guardian* interview, he wants his pupils to ask questions such as:

- Who produced this information, and why?
- Where was it published?
- What does it really say?
- Who is it aimed at?
- What is it based on?
- Is there evidence for it, or is this just someone's opinion?
- Is it verifiable elsewhere?

One of his young pupils puts it very simply: "You must always factcheck. The number one rule [is] no Wikipedia, and always three or four different and reliable sources. We learn that basically in every subject." And, showing a remarkable grasp of world affairs for a seventeen-year-old, another explains succinctly exactly why recognising and rejecting "fake news" matters: "Because you end up with wrong numbers on the side of a bus, and voters who believe them." Wow, just wow! Aye, facts are chieftains that winna ding...

So, returning to the "once in a generation" squirrel, even though we should absolutely dismiss the relevance of the quote it does throw up an interesting discussion around the word "generation", and the fact

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that any timeframe allotted to a generation is entirely dictated by context. Unionists like Alister Jack will have us believe it ranges between 25 and 40 years yet Apple brings out a "next generation" iPhone every year!

It could easily be argued that a political generation, for that is the only context applicable to our constitutional debate, is either four or five years as that is the maximum length of time that a Scottish or UK parliament can sit without an election, under normal circumstances. "Under normal circumstances" could certainly be interpreted as being subject to "material change", another phrase where the wording is hugely important in this context.

All of you reading this will be well aware of the material changes that have taken place since 2014, in addition to the lies, mistruths and false promises thrown around like a confetti smokescreen to confuse and mislead the "undecided" voters. Project Fear in full flow was the



Clown Prince de Pfeffel



Helsinki and Lerwick are on the same latitude



biggest propaganda operation mounted by the British establishment since the 1940s. Yet most of the arguments they put forward were exactly the same as those employed against America way back in the eighteenth century, from the apparent benevolence of "how can you possibly survive without our protection" to the outright threats of retribution to come later.

But, irrespective of the broken promises and material changes, there are plenty of examples of political generations being defined or interpreted on a much shorter timescale than the nay-sayers would have us believe. We're all pretty familiar by now, I suspect, with the fact that the *Good Friday Agreement* guarantees the right of Northern Irish citizens to a "border poll" once it appears likely that the majority would vote in favour of leaving the UK, and hence reuniting Ireland. In classic British political double-speak however, it provides no guidance as to how this "will of the people" to trigger the poll would be evidenced, leaving it entirely to the judgement of Westminster! But, and this is hugely significant, it also defines very precisely that, should the outcome be to remain in the UK, another poll could be triggered after seven years. That's handy in the immediate

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Scottish context then as 2014 to 2021 is, exactly, seven years! I don't think there should be any arbitrary time restrictions imposed on democracy. Circumstances change and, as we have seen in 2020, can change quickly, and citizens and their governments should be able to react accordingly. As the economist John Maynard Keynes may have insightfully observed, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"

An example of an ongoing referendum process without lengthy "generational" restrictions can be found in the, for us Scots, aptly named New Caledonia. Currently still a French "overseas territory", New Caledonia had an independence referendum in 2018 (57% "no"), 2020 (53% "no") and is on course to stage a third before 2022. And since the turnout increased from 81% in 2018 to 86% in 2020, the



Michael Gove – the oleaginous one!  
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Jacob Rees-Mogg – the obsolete one!  
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citizens of New Caledonia clearly don't view this as "neverendum", another worthless cliché that Britnats like to constantly repeat. In my opinion, this British establishment reluctance to hold referendums, on any subject, is because the ruling classes fear democracy and they fear being exposed to the true will of the people and therefore losing the power to run UK plc as their personal fiefdom. Recent examples would include awarding PPE contracts to chums who have no experience in PPE production, ferry contracts to other chums who don't even have any boats and countless other examples of billions of pounds distributed around the establishment chumocracy. Switzerland, in contrast, runs several referendums every year – some of them are even proposed directly by citizens! Maybe something worth looking at as we begin to seriously plan for an independent Scotland that rejects the corrupt practices of this dis-United Kingdom?

Having argued that words are important, which you would expect me to say since I earn a living churning them out, maybe I should go back and explain exactly why I chose some of the words that I did earlier. When I was describing some of the current generation of rabidly right-wing Tories I was, admittedly, doing a wee play on the "starting with the letter 'o' theme" to amuse both myself and, hopefully, you. But they were still chosen carefully. Maybe I was being a bit pedantic with "oleaginous"

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in describing Gove – "oily" would've worked almost as well and I only didn't use "odious" because I think I've overworked that when describing that particular example of house-jockery! I could've just as easily used sleekit, slimy, shifty, weaselly, or any other word that equally applies to the oleaginous one! For the ridiculous Rees-Mogg I used "obsolete", which seemed a fairly obvious choice given that everything about the toffee-nosed twit reeks of the eighteenth century! And I'll never tire of coming up with new ways to attempt to convey just how much disregard I have for Clown Prince de Pfeffel...

OK, after that light-hearted diversion to vent my spleen – again – let's not let it distract from the serious message I'm trying to convey. Words matter. And we, as *independistas*, have to be careful in our choice, and treatment, of words too. Encourage friends and family to ask questions about what they read and hear, like the Finns are doing. When apparently outrageous things are said, question the motivation. And call out the lies and obfuscation at every opportunity. Unionists like to tar this as "grievance" politics, yet another worthless slur to deflect genuine grievances being pursued and resolved. If being dragged out of the EU against our clear democratic wishes, if being hamstrung by Westminster's interpretation of *England's* needs while our government tries to follow sound scientific advice and international best practice in the fight against Covid, and if denying the right of Scottish citizens to democratically decide their constitutional future... if those, and many more, are not legitimate grievances that need to be pursued and resolved then the game really is a bogie! Final thought – the German language has a magnificent word that perfectly sums up the likes of Gove, Mogg, Johnson et al. **Backpfeifengesicht** translates literally as, "a puss in sair need o a skelp" – *wunderbar!*