Case Archive

# Chapter 14: Accountability and Politics

## Government Responsibility: How Should Government Communicate with Citizens?

In June 2008, comedian George Carlin died. For decades, he had been an acerbic observer of American society, but he was perhaps best known for his routine about “seven words you can never say on television.” Milwaukee police arrested him in 1972 for performing the sketch, and the case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled the dirty words in fact could not be said on television.

A week before Carlin’s death, the Local Government Association (LGA) in the United Kingdom took its own stand about words that bureaucrats shouldn’t use. It released a list of 100 words (see facing page) that bureaucrats should not use, along with a suggested substitute for most of them. The LGA suggested banning popular buzzwords like *citizen empowerment, coterminosity, empowerment,* and *stakeholder.* It also took aim at words it thought sloppy, like *facilitate* and *incentivising.*

The Top 100 Banned Words[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| Ambassador—leaderAgencies—Beacon—leading lightBest Practice—best wayBottom-Up—listening to peopleCAAs—Why use at all?Can do culture—get the job doneCapacity—Capacity building—enough room in the systemCascading—Why use at all?Cautiously welcome—devil in the detailChampion—bestCitizen empowerment—people powerCommunity engagement—getting people involvedConditionality—Why use at all?Consensual—everyone agreesContestability—Why use at all?Core Message—main pointCore Value—beliefCoterminosity—all singing from the same hymn sheetCoterminous—all singing from the same hymn sheetCross-cutting—everyone working togetherCustomer—people/personDemocratic mandate/legitimacy—elected to put people firstDistorts spending priorities—ignores people’s needsEarly Win—successEmpowerment—people powerEngagement—working with peopleEngaging users—getting people involvedEnhance—improveEvidence Base—research showsExternal challenge—outside pressuresFacilitate—helpFast-Track—speed upFlexibilities and Freedoms—more power to do the right thingFramework—guideFulcrum—pivotGood Practice—best wayGovernance—Why use at all?Guidelines—guideHolistic—taken in the roundHolistic governance—Why use at all?Improvement levers—using the tools to get the job doneIncentivising—incentiveIncome/funding streams—money/cashInitiative—ideaJoined up—working togetherJoint working—working togetherLAAs—Why use at all?Level Playing Field— | Meaningful consultation/dialogue—talking to peopleMAAs—Why use at all?Menu of Options—choicesMulti-agency—many groupsMultidisciplinary—manyOutcomes—resultsOutput—resultsParticipatory—joining inPartnerships—working togetherPathfinder—Why use at all?Peer challenge—Why use at all?Performance Network—Why use at all?Place shaping—creating places where people can thrivePredictors of Beaconicity—No ideaPreventative services—protecting the most vulnerablePriority—most importantProcess driven—shouldn’t everything be people driven?Quick Hit—successQuick Win—successResource allocation—money going to the right placeRevenue Streams—moneyRisk based—safest wayScaled-back—cut/reduceScoping—work outSeedbed—ideaService users—peopleShared priority—all working togetherSignpost—point in the direction ofSingle Point of Contact—everything under one roofSlippage—delaySocial contracts—dealStakeholder—other organisationsStep Change—improveStrategic/overarching—plannedStreamlined—efficientSubsidiarity—federal (still not great though)Sustainable—long termSustainable communities—environmentally friendlySymposium—meetingSynergies—what use at all?Tested for Soundness—what worksThird sector—charities and voluntary organisationsTop-Down—ignores peopleTransformational—changeTransparency—clearValue-added—extraVision—ideal/dream/beliefVisionary—as aboveWelcome—necessary and needed/step in the right direction |

The LGA list was a shot literally heard around the world. CNN picked up the story, as did many British newspapers. For the LGA, it was part of an ongoing campaign, and previous versions attracted fierce attacks. One blogger asked, “Who in the world thought this up? I would suggest that he/she be re-assessed and transferred to Mars.” The blogger thought that the LGA was suggesting citizens might not be up to sophisticated conversation. As another asked, “Are we really going to dumb down the English language to such a point that we speak to every adult as though they were a child?” Yet another: “[S]top thinking we are a bunch of illiterate buffoons unaware of what Councils [British local governments] are saying or unable to question to our satisfaction. Has there ever been a more patronising missive from LGA? Excuse me whilst I doff my cap, m’lud! I’d call it claptrap but that’s probably a word ‘we wouldn’t understand.’ “

But one blogger came to LGA’s defense, writing “Some of these are mild,” compared to other jargon that ruled government reports. An Australian commenter put it sharply in terms of administrative responsiveness: “I agree that the majority of the words should be avoided as many are overused” and lack any idea about how to “reinforce accountability.” A third: “When acronyms, poor grammar, and words that have inappropriate meaning are cobbled together reports become unintelligible.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The BBC had fun with the story by posting a photo on its website of a woman getting a holistic body massage and suggesting it was “apparently unrelated” to holistic government. Many of the words had roots in British governmental policy. One official denounced “holistic” as “gobbledegook,” but pointed to past government efforts that sought to improve the coordination among government programs and thereby make government more “holistic.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

To American ears, British language battles can sometimes be both amusing and hard to penetrate. What can we make of a country that has car parks instead of parking lots, lifts instead of elevators, nappies instead of diapers, bangers instead of sausage, and take away for food carried out from a restaurant to be eaten elsewhere. (Some language mavens have observed that British English often makes more sense than American English—after all, elevators lift more than they elevate.) Is this a *Masterpiece Theater,* *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* kind of battle that is most amusing because it is quaint to Americans?

The LGA officials responsible for the list argue otherwise. One plaintively said that it really came down to communication with citizens and how accountability works—how government connects with citizens, and how clearly the connections happen. “My big point has always been that the private sector is good at this and the public sector isn’t.” Look at the Nintendo Wii, he said. “It has lots of high-tech gizmos in it that are truly cutting edge but when they talk to people about it . . . in marketing, etc., they don’t mention the 87 wigabite memory or the Atheon Rayon xd36sdjd processor—they just say it’s great fun.” [Don’t try to look up this configuration—his tongue was firmly in cheek.] Otherwise, he said, they wouldn’t sell their machines and they would go broke. The public sector, by contrast, doesn’t really connect with people in terms they want or appreciate. His conclusion: too often, government officials just don’t get it, and accountability is weaker for the failure.[[4]](#footnote-4)

## Questions to Consider

Do you think words matter in how government officials communicate with the public? What suggestions would you have for the list of 100 words? Are there any you would propose taking off the list? (Remember that commentators often hail the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address as great pieces of literature, though language scholars have battled for centuries over Jefferson’s use of “inalienable” rights in the Declaration.)

Do you think that the choice of words affects the accountability of government? If so, how? Do mystical words or expressions full of jargon enhance government’s power or weaken its connection with citizens? Or both?

Think about your role as citizen. How would you like government to communicate with you? About what?

How would you view the issue if you were a government official? How do you think you ought to communicate with citizens?

1. Local Government Association (London: LGA, 2008), http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=41517. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?PAGEID=77-1430. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7470076.stm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Email to the author, June 26, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)