

**SPEECH NOTES FOR PREMIER NATHAN REES, MP
PLAIN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2009**

Dr Neil James [Executive Director, Plain Language Foundation]
Distinguished visitors, guests and friends ...

Let me begin with a plain statement in plain English.

Thank you for inviting me to your conference.

Or ... to put it another way ...

It is appropriate at the outset to record significant levels of interpersonal gratitude and relevant appreciation indicators in respect of the invitation to be present at your conference in order to facilitate a meaningful values-driven contribution to the proceedings.

Well, I exaggerate ... but not a lot.

And it may be significant that when that sentence was typed into a computer, the computer didn't question it with a wavy green line.

Standards are certainly on the slide when computers let us down.

So it's good to be among the champions and defenders of good, plain English ...

... and to welcome, especially, those of you who have come from overseas.

Your conference theme is “Raising the Standard”.

And by raising the standard of English expression we are doing more than making Government documents easier to read.

We are raising the standard of Government.

Because clear English makes for clear thinking.

And clear thinking makes for better decision-making ...

... with all the benefits that come with it ...

... improved delivery of services ...

... cost-savings ...

... in the longer term, a healthier, more responsible democracy.

Here in NSW ... with the support of the Plain English Foundation ... we've seen some excellent progress in a number of agencies.

In Treasury, as I'm advised, the drafting time for documents has been reduced by half through adopting plain English principles.

At Sydney Water, the time spent by management editing documents has been cut by 40 percent.

At the Audit Office of NSW, client satisfaction is up by some 92 percent.

All positive signs.

But despite the excellent work of the Foundation, the battle is far from won.

Or ... as some might say ...

Optimum levels of output in facilitating strategic Plain English objectives have not been identified consistently in all sectors.

It's not just governments and the bureaucracy which have developed a culture of using language to create ambiguity...to distract...or even to hide...the true intent or meaning.

Don Watson ... one of the great warriors in the cause of plain English ... has pointed out that the disease has infected academia and the professions ... not to mention the language of corporate management.

A culture that can turn people into "human resources" is a dangerous one.

In Don Watson's words ... and I quote from his book *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* ...

There have been signs of decay in the language of politics and academia for years, but the direst symptoms are in business. And the curse has spread through the pursuit of business models in places that were never businesses.

Universities that once valued and defended culture have swallowed the creed whole. Libraries, galleries and museums, banks and welfare agencies now parrot it. The public sector spouts it as loudly as the private does. They speak of focusing on the delivery of outputs and matching decisions to strategic initiatives ... In an education curriculum or the mission statements of an international fast food chain you will hear the same phrases.

That's vintage Watson.

And among Australian writers ... he's been joined by Clive James ... another great fighter for good English.

Both are the beneficiaries of an English literary tradition in which the models of plain English prose in the 20th century were the writings of Bertrand Russell, George Orwell, J.B. Priestley, and the historian Paul Johnson.

Paul Johnson's advice to writers ... written 25 years ago ... has lost none of its force today.

Beware ...he wrote ... of what I call bow-bow words. These are words which in effect say 'Keep off' to intruders, and are used by bureaucrats, politicians, educationalists, economists and other groups in real or supposed authority ...

And he listed some examples ...

... programming, cost-effective, counter-productive, pluralist, optimum, utilize, ongoing, orientation, parameters, structured, unilateral, growth-point, potential, significant (meaning big), environment, dialogue. There are a great many others.

But it's not enough to avoid bureaucratic jargon.

Plain English ... if it is to serve the objectives we seek for it ... must also be **good** English.

And clarity of expression isn't just a matter of simplifying the vocabulary...

...Or of resorting to a kind of facile colloquialism that may, in fact, be no clearer than the original.

Nor is it matter of brevity alone.

If it were, Twitterers and Facebook users would be writing exemplary government submissions.

The story is told ... and doubtless it's been told in many versions ...

... of how Winston Churchill asked an official at the Admiralty to summarise on a single sheet of paper the condition of the British Navy.

“Impossible,” said the Admiralty man.

“Really,” said Churchill, “I could do it with just one word. It's ‘good’ or it's ‘bad’. Anything beyond that is a lot of useless detail.”

Well, Churchill was always one for hyperbole.

But he was also a master of the language.

He understood that the best plain English requires a thorough grounding in basic literacy.

And that must start in our schools.

It must start with the teaching of grammar.

I don't mean that plain English requires a strict observance of every grammatical rule ... a point Clive James has argued.

James, of course, is a stickler for good grammar, and has written widely in praise of it.

But in his latest collection of essays he makes the point that grammar isn't everything.

*Bad writing ... he tells us, in *The Revolt of the Pendulum ... often doesn't need bad grammar to make it awful. It can be awful even while keeping all the formal rules. A perfectly bad sentence, indeed, can be an intricate miracle of ostensibly correct construction.**

What is required is a good working knowledge of grammar and a respect for the disciplines that good grammar instils.

Economy of language ... precision, consistency, a logical structure.

Let me quote an example of an English sentence from a recent NSW Government document –

Development that is to be demolished as exempt development under the Code must be development that can be constructed or installed as exempt development.

It reads like a brain teaser.

And if you parse and analyse that sentence in the old-fashioned way, it boils down to something like this –

You can only demolish something that you would have been allowed to build in the first place.

From which it follows that you cannot demolish anything that you would **not** have been allowed to build.

That's confusing enough for me...imagine how I'd feel if I was actually wanting to understand what I could or couldn't demolish!

No wonder grammar comes in handy.

Here in NSW, our schools are now giving a higher priority to grammar.

The NSW English Syllabus developed by the Board of Studies explicitly requires the teaching of grammar *in a practical and engaging way*.

Texts are used as the basis of grammar lessons and students apply the grammar they have learned to their own writing.

And the good news is that these methods are working.

I'm proud to say that NSW has the best literacy and numeracy rates in Australia ... with 94-97 percent of children reaching nationwide literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

And I apologise for using that word *benchmarks* ... Don Watson and Paul Johnson would almost certainly not approve of it.

But it's not only students who need help with grammar.

Many teachers need help as well.

So the Department of Education and Training is planning a training program for teachers to improve their knowledge of grammar and help them teach it more effectively.

All this will lay a solid foundation for the development of plain English skills in public life.

I am advised that the Plain English Foundation has already trained more than 3,500 NSW public servants in improving their writing skills.

Clear communication builds trust and confidence.

As a Government, we can never be truly accountable to the public unless we communicate in ways that people can readily understand or respond to.

In particular, people who speak English as a second language may well have trouble understanding Government information and accessing services.

I am advised by the Community Relations Commission that around 7.3 percent of the NSW population acknowledge that they speak English “not well, or not at all”.

So it's essential that public documents are written in good, plain English.

Even the general public ... people with normal language skills ... can have difficulty with technical language and jargon.

According to a 2006 survey, *Adult Literacy and Life Skills*, around 46 percent of NSW people have trouble locating and using information in everyday documents such as job application forms, payroll forms, transport timetables, maps, tables and charts.

In NSW, our agencies are working hard to improve the information they provide to the public.

Especially those agencies ... like State Emergency Services ... where clear English may literally save lives.

We have a long way to go.

The roots of the problem are deep and complex.

But as Don Watson has reminded us, the English language has always been strong enough to survive assaults on its integrity.

His latest book, *Bendable Learnings*, is an attack on the language of modern corporate management.

But he also takes a sideswipe at politicians.

I quote him in one of his pessimistic moods.

Can anyone imagine a premier sometime in the future speaking to us in a spontaneous and amusing way? One might as well imagine a government department that isn't values-driven, a bank that isn't customer-focused, schools that teach rather than deliver learnings and outcomes.

Don, I don't take it personally.

After all, I spent some years studying English literature.

And I lead a Government that takes these issues seriously.

Let me mention a few other initiatives my Government will be adopting shortly.

I'll be issuing a memorandum to the entire NSW public sector stressing the importance of plain English ... particularly in publications and documents intended for public use.

I want that memorandum to set the tone and establish the benchmarks for agencies in promoting the use of plain English.

I want plain English to become an essential part of how the public sector does business.

I want to see training in plain English stepped up across the public sector over the next two years.

And with this in mind, I intend to establish ... beginning in 2010 ... a special category in the Premier's Public Sector Awards for the best use of plain English in our public sector agencies.

But we must also ensure that the highest standards of plain English are achieved throughout the entire public sector.

We need rigorous tests for readability applied to all Government documents for public consumption.

I will therefore be directing the Department of Premier and Cabinet to arrange for random checks by focus groups of selected documents from every public sector agency.

The focus groups will assess the documents for readability, clarity, and ease of comprehension.

It will be a plain English audit of the entire Government sector.

And agencies that don't meet the high standards I require will be targeted for remedial training.

I am grateful for the support of the Plain English Foundation and Dr Neil James in this important cause ...

... and I look forward to your continuing support as we tackle the problem with fresh determination.

So ... ladies and gentlemen ... I leave you with this thought.

Future parameters for key human resources language management indicators are predicated on a high expectation of values-driven optimisation.

In other words ...

I remain confident.

And I wish you success in your important mission.

