

## The World Today with Eleanor Hall

An hour of current affairs background and debate from Australia and the world every Monday to Friday, 12:10 pm, ABC [Local Radio](#) and [Radio National](#).

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### Premier says speak English please

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Bronwyn Herbert reported this story on [Friday, October 16, 2009](#) 12:50:00

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SHANE MCLEOD: The New South Wales Premier has put the state's public service mandarins on notice - no more officialese. He wants plain English to be the default for discourse in his state.

Nathan Rees is pledging a plain English audit for the entire State Government and says there'll be a new award for the bureaucrat with the clearest and most concise writing.

The Premier who's been known to mangle the odd phrase himself has opened the international plain English conference in Sydney.

Bronwyn Herbert was there.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Bureaucracies have long been plagued by documents of complex sentences and confusing jargon.

The New South Wales Premier Nathan Rees says he's seen plenty of them like this building approval document.

NATHAN REES: Quote: "Development that is to be demolished as exempt development under the code must be development that can be constructed or installed as exempt development."

Now that reads as a brainteaser.

BRONWYN HERBERT: He says there's a much more simple way to say it.

NATHAN REES: It boils down to something like this: that you can only demolish something that you would have been allowed to build in the first place.

(Laughter)

You can imagine one of the taxpayers of New South Wales picking that up, looking at the document, looking for assistance in reading that.

BRONWYN HERBERT: This morning the Premier opened the Plain English Foundation's conference in Sydney where he announced a plain English audit of each government department and a new award for its best use by a bureaucrat.

NATHAN REES: I want plain English to become an essential part of how the public sector does its business, every bit as essential as a financial impact statement.

BRONWYN HERBERT: But the Premier might need to take a plain English audit himself. In June Nathan Rees spoke of the "complementarity" of timetables.

NATHAN REES: Better integration and complementarity of existing timetables.

BRONWYN HERBERT: The Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also has a liking for "complementarity" and dense language, as Neil James from the Plain English Foundation explains.

NEIL JAMES: Such as he did at the Brookings Institute last year when he was explaining our relationship with China and he said, "It's worthwhile thinking through how we might try and draw these differing concepts of responsible stakeholder and harmonious world together. There's on the fact of it a natural complementarity between the two approaches and a complementarity that could be developed further in the direction of some form of conceptual synthesis."

And I've read that passage a number of times and still struggle what developing a complementarity and some form of conceptual synthesis actually means.

BRONWYN HERBERT: But Kevin Rudd is also known for his use of colloquial language

KEVIN RUDD: Oh fair shake of the sauce bottle mate.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Neil James says this is part of Kevin Rudd's language shift.

NEIL JAMES: Part of his brain recognises maybe some of this jargon doesn't come across clearly, so what he tends to do then is also throw in some ockerisms; you know, 'fair shake of the sauce bottle', 'how're you going mate'. And also dropping in some of these cliches.

BRONWYN HERBERT: He says unclear language in the public sector can have some unintended but far reaching consequences.

NEIL JAMES: If you're working with a government agency and trying to understand a benefit for example or a particular service and you get a document that you can't read, then sometimes that leads to people not getting the services they are really entitled to.

And at other times it's just sheer inefficiency.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Dr Annetta Cheek is the chair of the Center for Plain Language in Washington. She told ABC Local Radio the severity of the problem is shown in the US where one Senator has admitted he won't read a health bill because he can't understand it.

ANNETTA CHEEK: One senator who said, I'm not going to read this because it's just gobbledygook. I can't understand it.

So we have a bill that's a thousand pages long and that's just incredible to start with, and people can't read it but they're going to pass it anyway.

BRONWYN HERBERT: The plain English audit of government departments will begin next year.

SHANE MCLEOD: Bronwyn Herbert reporting.

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