

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

The headline quoting the General Secretary of the Labour Party was Thatcher "out to smash the Unions to smithereens". It did not tell me anything very reliable about Conservative policy. It conveyed perhaps something of the frequent frenzy and self-defeating excess of party vituperation. Certainly it illustrated some abuse and degradation of language - and that was its most depressing significance.

All sorts and conditions of men join in this outrage of language - in their different ways. The politicians do it to convince us that the choice is between black and white, between sinner and saint with no resort to balanced language which might acknowledge their own deficiencies and even concede occasional virtue to their opponents. The advertisers do it to persuade, bamboozle or frighten us. And the experts do it: not only those like the doctors or lawyers or clergymen who traditionally have masked their knowledge in impenetrable jargon in order to keep the hoi-polloi impressed, ignorant and subservient, but legions of new experts in science and sociology. I remember some years ago reading this report:

"The lemon juice market has during the past several years been a static market in volume terms; research has indicated this is due mainly to the inconvenience of produce lemons plus taste/value negatives of present products in the market".

As the commentator pointed out this could adequately be rendered.

"People do not buy more lemon juice because it costs too much and does not taste good."

And would anyone argue that these are two equally acceptable ways of saying the same thing?

Does it matter, this abuse of language by exaggeration or obfuscation? I think it does - and one of the greatest dangers is that it distorts and confuses our understanding and judgement. Language is a means of thought and the means do help to determine the end, the medium we use shapes the meaning we achieve. James Thurber once urged "Cultivate your mind: it's the only thing you have to misunderstand with". Even more solemnly lets swear a mighty oath: to seek clear language, as a main condition and expression for clear thinking.

And I will try to remember that. Clarity, too, should begin at home - I agree, I agree!

How do the Twain Meet?

As I came away the other day (or rather night, for it had, of course, been a typically hard-working exercise) from a discussion of the relation between a Managing Director and his Board, I speculated on the same question - but in ~~Co-operative terms~~. Of course, there are many important differences between the two contexts, the public company and the Co-operative organisation. Lloyd Harrison notes one of those in his later article in this Bulletin: the Managing Director is likely to have directors who are professionally experienced in business:

members of Co-operative boards are drawn from very varied areas of experience and selected by a process of popular democracy. For all that, I pursued the speculation (or vice-versa) and I found more progress in appealing not to theory or principle but to my own recollection of cases, of chief officials and boards I had known.

In all these cases, the relation was intended to produce a coherent policy for the Co-operative organisation, drafted (and, if necessary, redrafted) by the official, approved by the board and subjected to continuing scrutiny. The two types of official most inappropriate for that process are at opposite ends of the spectrum. One is the dominating - affirmative and constructive but resistant and often impervious to the reaction of the directors. He does not ask the committee - he tells it. The outcome is constant tension and from time to time the noisy collision or unproductive paralysis of unyielding force meeting resentful and resistant object.

The other type is subservient - careful in procedures and administration, possibly helpful in analysis but neither firm nor constructive in advocacies. The outcome is often that the committee has to attempt to fill the vacuum in policy - working with ad hoc responses and expedients which it has neither the time nor experience to examine in depth or coordinate into a coherent and comprehensive policy.

Of the two, if that is the choice, I think the first is much to be preferred. Either, however, is likely to mean trouble for his organisation - and indeed, for himself, if he has any

sensitivity. The effective Chief Officials live somewhere between the extremes. Their exact locations will vary with the capacities and conditions of their boards but they are still recognisably the men in the middle.

Darkening our Lightness?

I was challenged recently for my quotation of the most ominous or foreboding quality. I had difficulty in deciding between two of great merit - in that respect. There was Richard Baxter, a 17th century divine recording:

"I preached as never sure to preach again
And as a dying man to dying men".

Even now his eloquence lays a cold hand upon me. And I found equal discomfort in Philip Larkin:-

"Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can
And don't have any kids yourself."

Well, can you do better - or worse?

February 1980

R.L.M.