

EVERYONE IN CANADA gets sent to school. Everyone is taught to read and write. Everyone is literate. Well, let's say semi-literate – a dangerous state. Better to be able to think than to read, if we have to choose.

Orwell was among the first to understand and to warn that sloppy language could enslave society. Those born in 1949 have read 1984 very likely. But what about those born in 1970? We are now virtually surrounded by Newspeak. It is perhaps the semi-literate societies like our own that are most in peril.

What brings this home to me is not so much the language of the admen – the hyperbole, the signification (the kleenest kleen of floor wax) – what brings it home is the language of government. The mere sloppy language has become the deliberately misleading language that Orwell described. It is a chilling development.

Leading government programs are being presented as free trade, tax reform, privatization, and fiscal restraint. God help us. There is no need in British Columbia to contrast the dictionary definition of *restraint* with the actual fiscal performance, with the grossly offensive performance in several instances.

Not many of us would care to use the word restraint in respect to the B.C. policy without putting quotation marks around it, and to that extent we remind ourselves of and alert our readers to the Newspeak it is. But what about those federal programs?

Free Trade! *Of course* we want free trade. Free is good. I like to be free. I don't want all those damn Nosey Parkers interfering at the border. But wait a minute. It is proposed that we have free trade only with the U.S.

Wait another minute; it is not free, it is not mutual – and it is not what you think. It is Newspeak. And the Newspeak word is being given currency far beyond government, that is, without the quotation marks.

The essence of Orwell's Newspeak was that the word carried the tone of the original but not the meaning, not the substance. Newspeak can only work, it seems to me, when it is still new. Newspeak can only persuade, in the absence of force, in that short time before people become entirely cynical or entirely befuddled.

The populace of Canada is now becoming both, having been deluged with government vocabulary. The proposed trade deal is designated Free Trade constantly, not just by its partisans and proponents but by media reporters, and even by erstwhile opponents who thus unwittingly do the proponents' job for them.

IT IS THE triumph of Newspeak, in fact, that it becomes the language not only of those who intend to mislead (and there are some) but of those who are led, and eventually of those who have struggled to resist.

Tax Reform is another phrase that has nearly made it into the Canadian Newspeak lexicon – nearly, but not quite. Linda McQuaig writes 23 pages of introduction to her story on the income tax (*Behind Closed Doors*, Viking, 1987) before she finally puts quotation marks around the word reform in the following



By MARY RAWSON

sentence: "The Wilson 'reform' is a masterpiece of cunning."

Wilson has given a whole new meaning to the notion of tax reform. While previous tax reforms sought to eliminate the favoured treatment of the rich, this reform consolidates the favouritism. Whereas special privileges were once the antithesis of tax reform, now they are part of tax reform.

Exactly. And is this not Newspeak on Wilson's part? Classic Newspeak in the Orwellian mold?

In a brilliant public relations stroke, Michael Wilson has stolen the mantle of earlier tax reforms, but left behind their substance.

I would say he has stolen the substance of tax reform and left behind its shell. It serves us better if commentators use the word change rather than the word reform in discussion of any government policies.

But one must give credit to Linda McQuaig. In trying "to take the subject of

** Edgar Benson was Canada's Minister of Finance in the Trudeau Liberal Government in 1969. Michael Wilson is Minister in the Mulroney Conservative Government.*

Speaking freely of tax reforms . .

tax cut out of the technical realm and bring it into the popular arena", she has promoted economic literacy as well as the other kind.

"Tax reform is the hobby horse of every radical bourgeois" (Karl Marx). McQuaig quotes Marx undoubtedly more in irony than in approval. Perhaps it is because Marx did despise tax reform that our taxes have grown into the frightful and oppressive agglomeration Canada has today?

Surely many more of our best brains would have been drawn to the study of fiscal policies if he had not uttered so scathing a dictum and thus contributed, albeit in a backhand way, to the sorry state of critical analysis.

Ms. McQuaig's hero, if she has one, is accountant Kenneth Carter, the late Chairman of the Royal Commission on Taxation (1967). Carter, who had begun by believing that there was not much wrong with Canada's tax system, ended after nearly five years of study by advocating a complete revamping.

Carter's tax rule can be crudely put as: "A buck is a buck and it doesn't matter where it comes from." While I am among those who were critical of the Carter Commission report, partly because of the scant attention it paid to the "benefits principle" of taxation, even more was I opposed to the Benson White Paper proposals which followed it.

I readily agree with McQuaig however that Carter's tax rule approaches desirable standards of simplicity with justice and that Michael Wilson's Tax Reform does anything but.*

McQuaig begins her description of the tax system with a striking metaphor – a march-past of income earners, thousands of tiniest pygmies at the front of the parade grading up to a few miles-high giants. She reveals the cosy world of corporations and the Finance Department, finally summing-up Wilson's tax reforms as "mostly smoke and mirrors".

We learn about it all. How foundations benefit family-held businesses as well as

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Cost of accountability

ABOLITION of the domestic property tax in 1990 (a year earlier in Scotland) will further deepen the North-South chasm that divides Britain. *Writes Peter Poole.*

But the Conservative Government's determination to substitute a Poll Tax (which it calls a community charge) on the head of each citizen over the age of 18 will not just have a geographically biased effect.

The class divide will also be accentuated. A family with an income of £100-150 a week will pay 4.6% of net income in poll tax compared with 1.7% for a family with an income of £500 or more*.

The spatial effects are also overlaid with complexities. The table shows that families in the poorer northern cities (Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle) lose out, whereas families in the richer southern and midlands towns (Woking, Slough, Worcester) gain.

But there is also a city level divide: households in the depressed inner areas of London (Hackney, Lewisham, Camden) also turn out to be worse off under Mrs Thatcher's changes.

The attack on inner city families is not

BRITAIN: Local taxation before and after imposition of community charges

District authority	Average rate bill per household 1987/8	Community charge per 2 person household	Gain or loss
Surrey Heath	519	280	+239
Woking	462	280	+182
Bromsgrove	433	270	+163
Slough	425	298	+127
Worcester	401	300	+101
Redditch	397	306	+91
Manchester	492	549	-57
Liverpool	500	602	-102
Newcastle upon Tyne	479	584	-105
Hackney	765	1382	-614
Lewisham	684	1354	-670
Camden	843	1564	-721

Source: *The Guardian*, 7 July, 1987, derived from Dept. of the Environment statistics.

an accident. The Prime Minister explicitly regards these "reforms" as a means of making councillors accountable to the electorate. The logic is that the poll tax will make people cost-conscious, whereas under the property tax many of them were exempt from

direct payments to their local authorities. This, according to the Conservative analysis, encouraged poorer families to endorse the programmes of spendthrift Labour councils.

In fact, councils will be less accountable to their electorates. For under the changes introduced by the Prime Minister, dependence on the authority of central government rises from 39% to 55% (1987) — the proportion of revenue spent by councils which they receive from the central Exchequer.

Mrs Thatcher, through the Whitehall machine, is tightening her grip on councils.

• The poll tax is an exceedingly unpopular policy with the electorate, but there is an alternative — site value rating. But the government resolutely refuses to consider this option.

Says Dr Paul Balchin, an economic lecturer at Thames Polytechnic: "Site value rating could serve as a single tax for local authorities; it would raise enough revenue to finance all of a council's needs out of local land values."

*"Ability to Pay?" London: Assn. of Metropolitan Authorities, Feb. 1988.

Yet the failures are no surprise. Since the 1930s, the basic preoccupation of governments has been to maintain a high level of employment. Keynesianism (a recipe for inflation) with its associated panoply of controls on wages, prices and overseas spending, plus nationalising the "commanding heights of the economy", has been the means to that end.

In turning the clock back on this creaking apparatus, Margaret Thatcher has shown that she sees it all as a debilitating quack remedy, to be swept away as soon as possible.

In this she is right, but she has one small problem: she has nothing to put in its place. So now, just as in the 1930s, the working population of this country are at the

mercy of the depression cycle, that sequence of booms and slumps that plagues those developed societies in which land and natural resources are dedicated to private profit rather than to the public interest.

In his final chapter, Peter Jenkins considers whether the Thatcher "revolution" is temporary or permanent. He suggests no answer but the reader will have no difficulty in forming his own. By virtue, primarily, of an ineffective Opposition, Mrs Thatcher has maintained her hold on the electorate for eight years.

Unless the opposition parties can find a real (i.e. non-Keynesian) remedy for unemployment and poverty she is probably set for another eight.

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their favourite think-tanks; the flim-flam artists of the Finance Department; the self-serving perfidy of certain of our important families; the judges who go along with the tortuous reasoning of investor tax-avoiders; the quick-flippers.

A whole caboodle of otherwise apparently smart and respectable persons are paraded. McQuaig suggests it might be better for us if these hard-working people went home early, and went "swimming or bowling or even carousing."

IN CANADA it is not Marx, but what the "experts" of the Finance Department have offered in the guise of tax reform that brings the idea into disrepute and makes it an object of derision.

As McQuaig says, although the tax laws are vast and complicated, the basic principles of taxation are not. We need more non-experts to get up and say something. Their presence could have a "dramatic and beneficial impact" on the current debate.

Speak! Speak! (But avoid Newspeak).