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Plain language for everyone

The Plain Language Bill, which would legally establish the Plain Language Act 2021, was introduced to Parliament in September last year and it is now on to the third reading.

The Plain Language Act would require that any informational document produced by a government agency for the public be written in “plain language”. “Plain language”, generally speaking, is the term applied to direct, precise language free of jargon and complex sentence structures.

It is perhaps a bit of fun to note that the definition of “plain language” in the proposed act has already been revised from its original form, as it was not written clearly enough.

The original version of the proposed act defined “plain language” as such: “plain language means language that (a) the intended reader can easily understand after 1 reading; and (b) is clear, concise, and well-organised, and follows recognised guidelines of plain language writing”.

Now the proposed act has the following definition: “plain language means language that is – (a) appropriate to the intended audience; and (b) clear, concise, and well-organised”.

This definition is both more clearly written and, interestingly, less restrictive than the original definition. These revisions reflect the voiced concerns that the bill would police speech too far. This concern is perhaps not helped by the language of section 8 of the act which states that “Plain Language Officers” must be appointed by reporting agencies to ensure compliance with the act. Though, as pointed out in a recent article on The Conversation website, the bill is procedural in nature and includes no actual enforcement mechanisms.

Concern about language policing has its merits. However, such concerns from linguists are most often to do with policed grammar rules of standardisation negatively impacting minority groups and additional language speakers.

The act specifies that it only applies to documents written in English, and part of its purpose is to support minority groups and additional language speakers. So how would the act do this?

People who have a basic knowledge of English usually know roughly the 2000 most frequently spoken words. However, knowledge of the 8000 most frequently spoken words is considered mid-level mastery of English and usually necessary to understand the complex sentences and jargon found in many government documents.

Writing in “plain language” means using language that can be understood by people of basic proficiency and above. This is an important consideration for linguistic equity because many of the informational documents in question are those that tell people how to follow government expectations as well as how to get help.

Additionally, the use of plain language means agencies producing documents can more easily be held accountable for what they say. Forensic linguists call language that is not “plain” (such as complex sentence structures, etc.) “cooperatively vague” language. Cooperatively vague language allows those using it to draw upon the imprecision of meaning to avoid responsibility if something goes wrong. Plain language, by contrast, is meant to remove much of that vagueness.

Before reaching the third reading, the Plain Language Bill has already raised awareness of the significance of direct, clear and concise communication when giving important information to the public.

'Bird of the Year 2022'
voting starts today ... with one notable exclusion



Ideology influences us all, no matter our labels



Donna Miles

Iranian-Kiwi writer based in Christchurch

The word “ideology” was coined in 1796 by French Enlightenment aristocrat and philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy.

Ideology, or the “science of ideas”, as he called it, is broadly based on two inter-related elements, the emotions people experience when they interact with the material world, and the ideas formed as a result of those interactions.

These days, the world ideology, especially when used by politicians, refers to a set of policies guided by a given system of beliefs.

Auckland’s new mayor, Wayne Brown, speaking about cycleways before the election, said he was not an “ideologue”, meaning that he was not going to let his judgment be affected by a particular ideology.

Where cycleways made economic sense, Brown clarified, he would allow them; where they didn’t, he would not.

But on what basis would Brown assess the economic soundness of cycleways? He explained that where they cost \$200-\$300 per metre, they were a good economic investment, but where they proved costly, it was not worth having them.

Of course, this way of thinking is loaded with a strong ideology that measures the value of all things based on the bottom line. Imagine if we said the same thing about all cancer treatments, making them available only where they could be offered at an economically sensible value – and not based on their life-saving potential.

To many, green policies are the

equivalent of cancer treatments for our sick planet, and have to be offered regardless of their value as an economic investment.

Others would argue that budget considerations are important because money doesn’t grow on trees, but a green ideology argues that money can indeed grow on trees, if we pursue a clean economy based on a just transition.

Whether one agrees with either view, the point remains that almost all of our actions and thinking are ideologically driven.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek goes as far as suggesting that even the way toilets are constructed in a given country is not purely based on utility, but reflects something of the national ideology.

I certainly agree that the emotions we experience in our everyday lives have a lot to do with the beliefs we develop later on.

Toilets are constructed differently in Germany, France and in America, Zizek observes. The traditional German construction allows for close examination of faeces, in line with the belief that the state of it is related to our general health, whereas French toilets are about its quick disappearance, and American (Anglo-Saxon) ones are a mediation between the two extremes.

Zizek interprets this triad as: reflective thoroughness (German), revolutionary hastiness (French), and utilitarian pragmatism (English).

In political terms, he explains the ideological differences that underpin these toilet designs as: German conservatism, French revolutionary

radicalism and English liberalism.

I certainly agree that the emotions we experience in our everyday lives have a lot to do with the beliefs we develop later on. Recently, I watched a video that has gone viral of an aggressive confrontation between a motorist and a cyclist. In the video, a furious motorist is being reminded of his wrongs by a calm but, I would say, slightly arrogant-sounding cyclist.

The video ends with the motorist’s spectacular fall on his face after he decides to chase after the cyclist who, moments before, can be heard sneering at him. It was clear the motorist was full of rage. The same hatred towards cyclists exists among many motorists who rely on driving regularly for their living in big, congested cities. This hate can easily develop into an intolerance towards green ideology.

In the same interview in which Wayne Brown spoke about cycleways, he said that they were good for general health. In saying that he was signalling to his potential voters that he was not yielding to a green-based ideology, but supporting cycleways as a nice-to-have option, where they didn’t cost much to construct. This view is in a sharp contrast with one that recognises climate change as an existential threat.

The same glaring contradiction was laid bare in a recent Kim Hill interview with National Party leader Christopher Luxon, about the Government’s agricultural emissions proposal. Luxon, despite accepting the urgency of the climate crisis, said he was happy for the country’s most polluting industry, the agriculture sector, to come up with its own regulations to limit its harmful emissions.

Brown and Luxon are examples of politicians who want us to believe concrete issues should not be turned into ideological problems – but all our actions and thinking are, inevitably, ideologically based.

As we face the double existential threats of climate and nuclear crisis, we need to insist on a clear dissection of the ideological basis on which politicians propose their policies.