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**Figuratively speaking**

**Language Matters**

In Māori Language Week, a few weeks back, much was made of the fact that Māori is a figurative language, and this was seen as a reason for giving the language support.

The very fact that “being figurative” was seen as a reason for supporting Māori, rather than “having particular important metaphors” (for example) seems to imply that there are other languages which might not be.

I disagree: every language is full of figurative expressions. In fact, one specialist, Raymond Gibbs Jr, has suggested that literal meaning is a corrupt idea. To illustrate, let me amuse you with a short piece of fiction.

When the *kids descended* on us for the weekend, they nearly *ate us out of house and home*, but we all had *a whale of a time*. When we played Trivial Pursuit, they *wiped the floor* with us on most topics, but we had *the last laugh* because they got *into hot water* answering questions about Shakespeare.

Next day, we *took off* for the beach in *brass monkey weather*, but a walk round the *headland* *blew away the cobwebs*. The posh cafes were *nothing to write home about*, and their *helpings* wouldn't *keep the wolf from the door*, so the kids needed a *square* meal later on. On Sunday, it *rained cats and dogs*, but the museum *came up trumps*. We didn't get a *chance to unwind* until they left.

The words and expressions in italics in the story are all figurative in one way or another. Because the figurative readings have been around for a long time, we don't notice them. An invented text like this one tends to crowd such examples together rather unnaturally. Another approach is to take a single word and see how it is used figuratively. Here I will look at *head*.

**A** literal head sits on one's neck. The head of a school or of a state is a figurative head (the same metaphor is present in *chief* and in *chef*, both of which have reached us via French).

The phrases head of a bed, head of a pimple, a head of broccoli, a head of a stream, the head of a valley, a headline, and come to a head are all metaphors.

Put something into someone's head, win by a head, head-hunting, head of cattle, give someone their head, have one's head screwed on, keep your head above water, to bang one's head against a brick wall, off the top of your head, to be in over one's head, to be head over heels in love, to bite someone's head off and to scream one's head off and even to head a ball are all figurative in one way or another.

All these examples show that English (as an example of a general trend) does not lack figurative expressions. We don't notice most of them, because they are so familiar – they are the normal way of saying something.

A new language brings us face to face with unfamiliar figures, and we notice them and find them picturesque or incomprehensible as the case may be. New learners of English (or Japanese or Hungarian) are just as struck by the unfamiliar figures of speech as new learners of Māori.

All languages have well-entrenched figures of speech. When we learn a new language, we have to learn the new figures of speech as part of the new culture. Figures of speech in every language are important for speakers of that language, and reflect something of the culture in which the language has developed.



**Hopeful signs of curing our punitive instincts**



**Donna Miles**

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It came as no surprise to me that National Party leader Christopher Luxon chose Hamilton West to announce his policy involving military-style boot camps for young offenders.

Hamilton West is where a by-election has been called after the resignation of former Labour MP Gaurav Sharma. It is also where the scourge of ramraids looms large in the mind of voters.

A number of reports have already dismissed Luxon's boot camp policy as ineffective. These reports are supported by research evidence that shows the best way of reducing youth crime is to address its causes. Young people respond to socialisation, inclusion and connection, not punishment, researchers say. They “learn to obtain respect for others by respecting themselves. As a community, we are all invested in growing healthy, respectful and supported young people”.

But why would Luxon announce an obviously doomed policy? Populist politicians, in general, allow electoral advantages of a policy to take precedence over its effectiveness. They tap into punitive justice because it reaps two important benefits: it appeals to our instinct for punishing those who harm us, and emphasises the punisher's power, making them appear tough on crime.

Penal populism, where political parties compete to appear tough on crime, is nothing new. Neither is the centring of punishment as a cornerstone of policies that go beyond criminal justice. Australia's deadly and torturous offshore asylum policies are well documented; so is the UK's cruel intention to punish asylum seekers by shipping them to Rwanda.

And it was the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill who, in trying to explain away the increasing domination and suppression in the colonies, said: “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.” Needless to say, every despotic and authoritarian government, from former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte, known as “the punisher”, to Iran's current autocratic regime feels it is dealing with barbarians and that its tyranny is a justifiable means to an end.

Recently, I attended a public debate in London about the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia. The arguments against sanctions were compelling. Author and columnist Sir Simon Jenkins said a major study had found that, although sanctions hurt and damage the targeted country, they almost never achieve their political goal. This is certainly true in the case of Iran, where sanctions have had the opposite intended result by strengthening the country's hardliners without hampering its nuclear programme.

In Russia, severe sanctions are more than just ineffective, they are counter-productive. Soaring energy prices and rampant inflation in the West create the real danger of weakening public support for the war and increasing Russia's adaptability and self-sufficiency.

But none of the above evidence caused politicians in the West to reconsider their approach, because they felt there was a strong public appetite for punishment and they had to respond to it. The same punitive sentiment led the Cardiff Philharmonic to remove Tchaikovsky from its programme, deeming it “inappropriate”.

But this does not mean that our instincts and beliefs are not prone to change. In 2018, Ireland voted, by a landslide, to repeal its near-total ban on abortion. The vote was an extraordinary victory for women's rights, given the country's religious conservatism. The Irish prime minister at the time, Leo Varadkar, described it as the culmination of a quiet revolution that had been taking place for the past 10 to 20 years.

When it comes to youth crime, there is some evidence that suggests the same quiet revolution is happening in New Zealand and will hopefully result in greater demand for moving away from punitive policies.

In the meanwhile, it is up to our media to continue to hold populist politicians to account by scrutinising their policies, especially when these policies are designed to target the most vulnerable and marginalised groups without delivering an effective outcome and, in many cases, even causing greater harm.

**“Punitive justice... appeals to our instinct for punishing those who harm us, and emphasises the punisher's power...”**