DOUBLETALK — TOO CLEVER BY HALF

Environmental Doublespeak — Environmental Ethics, Anti-Environmental Propaganda, and Greenwashing Language

In George Orwell's amazing (and scary) novel 1984, people used "newspeak" and "doublethink." It was soon after that the term "doublespeak" started being used to describe the words of politicians who were trying to sound like they were saying something without really having said anything tangible they could be pinned down on. More recently, doublespeak has been increasingly used as a clever way to cover up lies.

In this decade, a new brand of this twisty-turny language emerged: Environmental Doublespeak. Here are a few of the dubious phrases:

"using common sense"

"modernizing regulations" or "updating laws"

"simplifying and streamlining regulations" or "eliminating red tape"

"clarifying regulatory language"

"improving the way we protect the environment"

picture of politician with microphone to his mouth On the surface, these concepts are hard to argue with. Who wouldn't be in favor of reforming laws that are so outdated that they have become useless? What right-minded environmentalist wouldn't want to improve the way we protect the environment?

“IT'S CODE LANGUAGE, .007”

The problem is that environmental-doublespeak phrases are usually code language designed to obscure the fact that the speaker really intends to weaken environmental protection. Here are some common statements you hear from the sham environmentalists:

"We're taking another look at the science associated with the problem."

"We plan to invest in more study of the problem."

"We want to make decisions based on sound science."

Again, such statements seem reasonable enough; but in practical terms, one can usually substitute the following phrase with perfect accuracy: "We plan to do whatever we can, including funding more studies on topics that are already well understood scientifically, to delay any strengthening of regulations in this area."

Much of environmental doublespeak is about "framing"—a political technique for using language that implies something positive rather than language that implies something negative. The most famous frame is probably "pro-life" (instead of anti-abortion). Our brains are more receptive to positive phrases, especially those that imply a broader positive meaning when taken outside the debate topic. In the case of "pro-life," if you take the phrase beyond the abortion debate, well, who isn't "pro-life"?

THE DOUBLESPEAK OF “SOUND SCIENCE” AND “BALANCE”

The phrase "we need sound science" has been used a lot during this decade to cast doubt on scientific evidence that is already solid, make the anti-environment speaker sound prudent, and make his opponents sound like reactionary Chicken Littles. But don't blame the phrase—the concept of sound science is a fine one; it's just been co-opted for use as cover by plutocratic, polluter-friendly politicians.

Environmental doublespeakers are also fond of stressing the need for "balance" when crafting environmental laws. Again, this is reasonable on the surface, but the devil is in the details. Today, the result desired by those preaching a need for "balance" is usually environmental regulation that is more acceptable to corporate polluters.

MISCELLANEOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DOUBLESPEAK

There's another type of environmental doublespeak: statistical manipulation. Consider, for instance, the statement, "The environment has gotten much cleaner in the last 30 years." That is a fact, at least in developed nations, but the implication is that there is a constant positive trend and that things are just about to the point where they're "clean enough"—so forget about toughening up any more.

But much of the environmental progress of the last 30 years occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s. We should be asking about RECENT trends and actions—i.e. what have you done for me lately? Half of US residents live in counties with unhealthful air and 40% of our surface waterways are not safe for swimming or fishing (with nearly all states having issued health warnings about mercury contamination in locally caught fish). Does that sound "clean enough" to you?

LIES, DAMN LIES, AND STATISTICS

Twisting statistics is an old game, and foes of a clean environment and public health are old pros at it. More and more, though, they just outright lie. For instance, proponents of genetically modified crops constantly say that GM crops reduce pesticide use and are needed to feed a hungry world. Both assertions are false.

So, how does one know when an industry rep is exaggerating, twisting statistics, or lying? There's no easy answer to that, but an old joke comes to mind: How do you tell when a PR flack is lying? His lips are moving.

As energy issues have become prominent, doublespeak is creeping in there too:

When they say "gas-price relief," they often are referring to their plan to ease regulation of refinery emissions or pollution-reducing gasoline blends.

Politicians have become fond of saying that we can drill for oil in an "environmentally sensitive" manner—while simultaneously subverting efforts to regulate or ban environmentally damaging drilling techniques like fracking.

When politicians speak of "energy independence," they use it as an umbrella term that excuses the limitations and negative consequences of many of their "solutions" like drilling in coastal areas, biofuels, and nuclear energy.

There is also something that might be called "insult doublespeak." This type of environmental doublespeak is intended to not only assert the speaker's enthusiasm for making progress on environmental problems but also to cast doubt on the motives or mental capacity of anyone who would criticize or oppose their views:

"Those opposed to this plan are guilty of 'old thinking'; we need 'new thinking' on environmental problems."

"Criticism often comes from those who seek to protect the status quo."

"We should regulate based on science, not emotion."

Euphemisms are another problem; for instance, program cuts and layoffs at the US Park Service were at one point described as "service level adjustments."

The overall strategy of practitioners of environmental doublespeak is to soothe the public's concern about environmental problems while they quietly act to implement changes that please political patrons and weaken environmental protection. Here are a few additional phrases to beware of, either because they are meaningless without positive action to back them up or because they are code language designed to disguise true intent:

"we're committed to the environment"

"better ways to protect the environment"

"reduce regulatory uncertainty"

WRAP-UP

This article is not meant to provide a definitive list of environmental doublespeak phrases. That would be impossible—the phrases themselves are relatively innocent; it's the duplicity behind their use that is the problem. Additionally, political spinmeisters are constantly coming up with new strategies for doublespeak. We simply urge a general attitude of suspicion towards language used to describe positions on the environment.

In fact, environmental doublespeak is a minor subset of a much broader suite of propagandistic tools covering the entire range of political topics. The oratorical tool kit includes... framing, phony research outfits and their junk science, mysteriously funded think tanks whose sole purpose is to craft propaganda and political strategies to advance agendas that serve to maximize corporate profits and serve the interests of wealthy elites,

the general suppression of meaningful news on corporate-media outlets,

video news releases ("fake news"),

total saturation of our "thought space" with marketing and spin,

cooption of university research programs and suppression of research results that don't conform to the desired outcome,

"rewriting history" and controlling what is allowed in school text books.

We are constantly exposed to very carefully crafted programming designed to make us think the way The Powers That Be want us to think. A brief but fascinating history of such persuasion techniques is presented in this article by Dr. Tim O'Shea: The Doors Of Perception: Why Americans Will Believe Almost Anything.

So, the next time you hear a politician talking about the environment say something like "We have different solutions, better solutions," you might want to say, "Could you be a little more specific, Senator Smogg?"

Keep thinking, keep questioning!