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Health Care: Finding Hidden Meaning in Political Words

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

January 17, 2016

After the most disruptive and disreputable presidential campaign and transition in memory, I seriously relate to the words of “My Fair Lady” lyricist Alan J. Lerner from the song “Show Me,” which begins: “Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I get words all day through; First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?”

That song gets at the point that actions can count as much as words. Meaning can be found in the actions the speaker takes both before and after political words are proclaimed. But as much as actions can help define the real meaning of words, the words themselves are the sharply-honed tools of the trade in politics and governance just as notes on the scale are the tools of the trade in music.

Words are powerful, whether the high-minded inspirational words of a politician seeking to lead with hope and aspiration or words of attack and denigration meant to harm and turn the listener to fear. Words may not move mountains, but they can and do move the body politic. Politicians know that and the most skillful of them take advantage -- if we allow them.

As citizens we must look behind political words to find their true meaning. We must be critical listeners determining whether the words reflect rhetoric or reality. We must be alert to the manipulations of words that seek to mislead or distract us from what is real.

George Orwell, in his 1947 essay “Politics and the English Language” said that “...language can also corrupt thought.” Two years later in 1949, in his prescient novel “1984,” Orwell sharpened those concepts when he wrote about the totalitarian use of “newspeak,” defined in Merriam Webster Learners Dictionary as “speech or writing that uses words in a way that changes their meaning especially to persuade people to think a certain way.”

Political manipulation of thought by the use of words can result in the people being the tool of ambitious politicians rather than being the beneficiary of the actions of politicians. While we shouldn’t be automatically suspicious of every political assertion, it pays for us to be vigilant and disciplined in our listening to make sure we are not being politically manipulated.

When it comes to political language today, we are coming to recognize the difficulty of actually trying to get meaning out of Donald Trump’s long-winded, meandering, convoluted and self-aggrandizing non-answers to legitimate citizen or journalist inquiries. Just read his words and weep.

A very real political language challenge today relates to the future of the Affordable Care Act, AKA “Obamacare.” For six years (and 60 votes) we’ve heard “repeal” without any GOP plans for what to do after that. What did “repeal” mean for Americans? And now that, as Senator Steve Daines says, they are finally “playing with live ammunition,” they’ve had to come up with “repeal and replace.” But again, with what? They cannot provide the details when we press them. We have a right to be skeptical and worried.

Congressional Republicans have become afraid that they might have to bear the full responsibility of throwing 20 million of their voters out of healthcare coverage. They actually admit they want to keep much of Obamacare, whose component parts are popular. Folks hate the demonized name of Obamacare but like many of the individual parts of the Affordable Care Act. They want Democrats to help them out politically, so they are edging from “repeal and replace” toward “repeal and reform.” What will “reform” mean?

Perhaps they should actually get real and just “rename and reform.” Call it Trumpcare, keeping most of Obamacare while fixing up the few things people don’t really like. But we as a citizen/voters need to remain wary of what that could mean. Because the GOP “reform” is likely to propose replacing health care “coverage” with health care “access.” Just words – but with meaning. You know, replacing actual coverage with the empty pledge of the “opportunity” to be covered. Listen carefully to the words. Find their meaning. Learn what’s really going on and don’t be manipulated by the language. We will then be better (and healthy) citizens and the nation will be better, too.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, just retired after 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

(700 words in the body)