

Too much egg, not enough substance

I despair about one of the great paradoxes of our times - the abuse of words.

It's a continuum with over-sized outer ends separated by a deep gulf that's beyond navigation by most people, me included.

One end is represented by Twitter, which constrains human communication to a few words, sufficient apparently to govern what used to be the world's most powerful nation.

At the other extremity is that over-egged rhetorical realm, the official report, a weapon of mass obfuscation deployed by governments and the organisations that lobby them to ensure nobody but a small community of meek and patient earth inheritors really know what the hell is going on.

My main concern is that latter end.

At the recommendation of a senior journalist who has adapted to the mist-shrouded echo chambers of power and skilfully reports them, I tried reading a QANGO (quasi non-governmental organisation) report relevant to the election debate about who cares most about farmers.

The qango is called the Primary Sector Council. I should say "was" called, because it was set up by the government in 2018 to look at the future of farming and appears to have been stood down this year after its two reports were released (to no apparent effect) in June.

The one I've just attempted to decode is called "Taiao Ora, Tangata Ora: The Natural World and Our People Are Healthy", an optimistic title, given the climate change and environmental challenges we face.

The report is, um, hard-going. Not from a grammatical or technical point of view (although some crucial hyphenations are missing), but because of its constant repetition of lofty adjectives and nouns in phrases punctuated by many commas separating words that sometimes mean more or less the same thing.

Here's an example: "Te Taiao commits to co-design and partner with communities in catchments to deliver a new, holistic mountains-to-the-sea pathway, focusing on the wellbeing of the land and waterways, the climate and living beings.

"This will be done through developing catchment-level practices across clusters of operations to achieve landscape-wide benefits for the local environment and community; providing long-term support capability and resources for catchment groups to progressively develop future localised holistic systems relevant to their local environments, their story for market and an understanding of critical consumer needs, wants and values that align with Te Taiao; supporting the development of regional/catchment Te Taiao based appellations for local specialty products alongside local communities."

On its own, the above is semi-coherent, but that's because I've taken it from its context, which is endlessly repetitive.

The concepts being described are straight-forward, as is often the case with official reports. However, nobody working in the environments that produce these tomes

would ever be commended (or paid) for conciseness, so over go many eggs to transform what should be a simple proposition into something grandly verbose.

In case you think I'm being unfair picking on a single report from a particular body, let me assure you writing of this kind is endemic within all central and local government.

Some report writers do try to summarise their main points, knowing most politicians are too busy (or incapable) to read long dissertations. The danger with that is the devil often does hide in the detail, so the implications of what is being dutifully recorded may be missed.

I don't envy the people who feel obliged to write all this crap. Some who have done it for a lifetime may be the ones who find release from playing practical jokes with our language.

They take obscure single words and adapt them for a new purpose, creating buzzwords to be inflicted on the rest of us. "Learnings" is a current one. Whatever happened to "lessons"?

What all this leads to is the exclusion of most people from the basic processes of government, an arena that ought to be transparent.

The irony is that in an election year political candidates head in the opposite direction, deliberately simplifying their language in the hope of attracting support. If only they would apply the same standard to their functionaries during the terms in power that follow.

Political plain-speaking has its own perils, as well. Candidates trying to sound down-to-earth often over-simplify.

I'm grateful for Stuff's election-news feature "The Whole Truth", which examines particular claims to see if they stack up. Often they don't. That's good journalism - writ plain.