

Don't vote for Bullshit

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12 April 2005

Tom Nairn offers his advice to voters in Britain's general election.

Inquiring at an Oxford bookshop about the latest tome from Harry G Frankfurt, Princeton's emeritus professor of philosophy – *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005) – I expected a delay, or maybe an expedition to the basement. Instead, the info desk attendant just reached round to the other side of the till, and handed my copy over from the top of a large pile. Today bullshit is popular, and big business.

And so it should be. As Frankfurt observes, we constantly swim in the stuff, yet lack “a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us”. In the context of New Labour's 2005 re-election campaign, the question has become of even greater importance. The author begins by pointing out that bullshit must not be confused with lying. It is far worse: a gladdening substitute for truth, capable of seeping into the very foundations of discourse. The medium is indeed becoming the message, but in a way far fouler than Marshall McLuhan imagined almost forty years ago. “I am the Word”, it assures us, “...and there is no alternative, no other word any longer makes sense”.

Far from decrying it, the *pensée unique* of the bullshit world *fetishises* sincerity. Its British ringmaster, known to his colleagues as “TB”, is a champion of feigned sincerity, most in command when affecting to

stumble over just the right, novel term — the flash of non-inspiration capable of reiterating what each listener or viewer knows already. Each reiteration of course confirms such non-knowledge, making it seem more natural than before. “Insofar as this is the case” (I quote Professor Frankfurt's conclusion) “...sincerity itself is bullshit”. This echoes the argument Anthony Barnett is developing in his [openDemocracy](#) election blog.

As St Augustine noticed seventeen centuries ago, passage into the bullshit underworld includes a borne from which no traveller returns: the soul thus lost falls in love with deceit, and ends up feeling it to be more real than the world left behind. One can recover from Francis Wheen's “Mumbo-Jumbo”, but not from naturalisation into pseudo-land.

The professor traverses much of this dark domain, right up to Max Black's *The Prevalence of Humbug* (1983), and notes its modern military dimension. This too was typically British: “Unnecessary routine tasks or ceremonial, excessive discipline or ‘spit-and-polish” (OED), a character-formation intended to prepare the feckless for total, reflex obedience. The bullshit universe, comments Frankfurt, is “a matter not of falsity but of fakery”. And because fakery is a

genuine art, it calls for analysis in its own right: one turd can be compared to another. This is why “bullshit artist” is such a common appreciation, notably at election time.

No one believes bullshitters; but in an odd way, that's the point. As Frankfurt says: “However conscientiously...the bullshitter is also *trying to get away with something*” and the message is invariably a certain impression of him or herself. He or she is to be *trusted*. Bullshitting aims at the formation of trustworthiness, as Eric Ambler's character in *Dirty Story* discovered at an early stage in life: “One of the first things my father taught me was, *Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through*”. There definitely is such a thing as society, in other words; and it's an everlasting confidence-trick.

Although Professor Frankfurt covers the philological ground admirably, he is less convincing about its contemporary causes. “Why is there so much bullshit?” he asks plaintively near the end. Partly because there's more mass communication, clearly; but there must also be “deeper sources” of plagues like neo-conservatism and New Labourism. Bullshit inclines naturally towards the general, the inclusive “-ism”. And the profounder cause at work must be the emergence of a new would-be global governing class, searching desperately for its own -ism. A “vision” of humanity not yet existent has to be conjured up, alongside absolute trust in the representatives of this fabulous future.

The womb is fertile yet, and providing ideal conditions for a global bullshit takeover. Hence neo-liberalism and the “The Third Way”: an engineering of mass electronic consent, in which a disabused left (both Leninist and social democrat) has contributed its traditional ideological energies to the economic good fortunes of recrudescing capital. Conception took place in think-tanks, gestation followed in the 1990s, and led on to the most important birth at the millennium, when George W Bush was “elected” by the United States Supreme Court.

This was a perfect example of the general formula summed up by Frankfurt:

“*Hot air* seems an especially suitable equivalent for *bullshit*...Excrement may be regarded as the corpse of nourishment, a representation of death that we ourselves produce and that, indeed, we cannot help producing in the very process of maintaining our lives.”

Just to get by, global subjects must learn to think and speak excrement, in Anglo-American if possible. The ideal of the reborn Free World is all-round self-

colonisation, with accountable captains of bullshit at every helm.

There is only one big problem in the way: democracy. Because of its origins and timing, global bullshittification has to *include* formal democracy, while simultaneously neutralizing it. It can't just ignore it, like old-time colonialism. So far, the trick has been managed by the grotesque inflation of anachronisms like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australian constitutions. Postmodern newness has dragged the early-modern back into service.

Yet there are obvious limits to the tactic. And in fact a massive intellectual reaction against it is under way. The popularity of essays like *On Bullshit* and *The Prevalence of Humbug* shows this, as do Wheen's *How Mumbo-jumbo Conquered the World* (2004) and Don Watson's two outstanding volumes from Australia, *Death Sentences: How Clichés, Weasel Words and Management-speak are Strangling Public Language* (2005) and *Gobbledygook* (2004).

In addition, there are the new edition of Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1988), *New Keywords: a Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), and Michael Quinion's invaluable guide to *Ologies and Isms* (2002).

Death to bullshit: the overall message is plain, and one crucial aspect of this turning cultural tide is recognition that “plain English” (Orwell-speak) is no longer an answer. New languages are indeed required, in the plural, and must be worked at. The assault on “political correctness” was bullshit's attempt to defuse this dangerous change. “Plain speaking” was long ago ideologised into the “obvious”, as distinct from the comprehensible. That is, into ideas not only received but consecrated, and (as Watson demonstrates) recyclable into the pseudo-new of management-speak and smartass last-wordism. New Labour is no more than a second-rate variant of the latter.

Don't vote for bullshit, wherever you feel its presence. Get a copy of *On Bullshit* instead. It's only the size of a passport, and will fit into most inside pockets. Over the past week of unadulterated representations of death (Pope, Blair and Brown at Longbridge, pseudo-Royal nuptials) I have found its presence quite reassuring. It can also be easily taken out and waved at bullshit vendors crossing one's path between now and the 5th of May.

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