



Speech by

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USE OF PLAIN ENGLISH IN GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (5.17 p.m.): Not to be outdone by the member for Barron River, let me say that, when articulating artful aphorisms and extemporaneously orating in philosophical terminology, beware of tautologous exactitudes and avoid platitudinous ponderosity. I have it from a good source in this House that this gabble, when simply put, means "speak plain English". It shows that, if we want to appear very accomplished, articulate and highly intelligent, we can draw on lots of big words in our English language to do so. But who benefits from this? I would say that nobody does.

The infamous "please explain" line from Pauline Hanson, when asked about xenophobia, demonstrated how big words can throw even the high-fliers amongst us. The use of big words, longwinded sentences and jargon is all too common in public letters and publications. We all find ourselves asking the "please explain" question. We have all been using it, but Pauline immortalised this quote.

I support the member for Nicklin in his quest for all department heads to ensure that plain English is used in all Government correspondence and that this directive apply to all consultants working for this Government. This is a commonsense request—a request that will make Government correspondence more readable and therefore more accessible to the public. In fact, all departments should also seek to produce more multilingual information and produce more information in a format that is accessible to visually impaired people. However, I will leave this point for a later debate.

Another point which I will not push today but which I will pick up later on, possibly with the Attorney-General, is that of legal jargon and legal contracts. Let us put that one on hold and pick it up at a later time. Why spend hours producing documents or letters if the message is not clearly understood and only picked up by a few people? The aim of written communication is to get a message across. The writer has failed in this aim if the message is not understood.

The message to keep communication simple is getting through to some organisations and areas of Government. Manufacturing unions and employers are to be commended for rewriting the Metal Industry Award in plain English. That award covers 12,000 manufacturing companies employing about 180,000 employees. It is essential that employers and workers fully understand their rights and responsibilities under awards. Imagine the anarchy if 180,000 workers failed to understand their award.

Another example to be commended is the rewriting of domestic building contracts in plain English. This initiative is designed particularly to give greater protection to consumers. Consumers must clearly understand the clauses in contracts that they are to comply with. If they do not understand what is written, they risk being ripped off, sued or suffering some other evil, and all these evils are preventable.

Our own member for Ashgrove, Mr Fouras, also scores a gold star for his forehead today. During his reign as Speaker, he implemented some plain English changes to the parliamentary petitions. Previously, petitions included this clause—

"The humble petition of the undersigned citizens in the State of Queensland respectfully showeth"—

and the grievance was inserted—

"Your petitioners therefore humbly pray that the Parliament in Queensland will"—

and the action was inserted. Under the changed format, it now reads—

"The petition of the citizens of Queensland draws to the attention of the House"—

and the grievance is stated—

"Your petitioners therefore request the House to"—

and the action is clearly stated. These are relatively simple or minor changes, but I think they are quite important.

The principle of keeping things in plain English, of keeping things simple, is very important. In common with the member for Chermside, I believe that there is a message for all of us in the motion moved by the member for Nicklin, and that message is: let us also keep our speeches in this Parliament simple and in plain English. I do not believe that we are using too many big words, but there are a lot of longwinded, garbled statements that Hansard and other members have to decipher. I commend the motion to the House.
