

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Summer 2006 Issue 65

Words of support

Politicians and clients alike lend their support for plain English and the Campaign's new website

Several leading politicians have confirmed their support for plain English and the Campaign as we prepare to launch our new website (see page 2). Conservative leader, David Cameron MP, said that "All politicians are guilty of slipping into jargon - and all of us deserve scrutiny from the Plain English Campaign. Complicated sets of initials, official jargon, bureaucracies that over-complicate things to boost their own importance — all of these things help to build barriers between government and people." He also congratulated the Campaign on all it has achieved to date.

Sir Menzies Campbell, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, said that "the hard work of the Plain English Campaign to draw attention to this significant issue has been paramount in the improving English standards in our society." Former Liberal leader Charles Kennedy also sent a message, saying that "The English language is without doubt one of our most cherished



David Cameron MP

national and international resources. It is functional and fulfilling in equal measure. We need to keep it that way in the political discourse of our national life."

We also received messages from broadcaster Andrew Marr, and the First Minister of Scotland, Jack McConnell. McConnell said that "Plain English Campaign has been quick to remind us of the importance of straightforward language. Keep up the good work."

Although we were clearly delighted that we received support from such high-profile people, on a more serious note it is a sign that politicians in particular are perhaps

finally realising that plain English is by far the best way to get people excited about politics again. On the centre pages of this magazine, we look at how the first parliamentary bill appeared with a plain English translation alongside the legislation. It seems that plain English is in the news again.

What was also pleasing for us was that several clients confirmed what we had always known — that their customers appreciate a commitment to plain English. Irish Life, who have a large number of Crystal Marks on their documents, and hold the record number of 'Honesty Marks' (for documents that 'mean exactly what they say') sent us the following.

"With the help of Plain English Campaign, all Irish Life product brochures, booklets of terms and conditions and annual benefit statements carry the Crystal Mark for both clarity and honesty. This huge effort has been warmly endorsed by our customers."

Inside: PEC has a makeover, the Coroner's Draft Reform Bill, the results of our World Cup survey, everyday English and more!

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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Moving forward

Plain English Campaign freshens up with a modern makeover

It has been a useful resource for many years, but we have decided that it is time to update our website. It has been a fairly long process, but the new website at www.plainenglish.co.uk will be live at the end of July. We hope that our supporters, and indeed everyone else, will find the new site much easier to use than the old one, as well as being easier on the eye. Many people contacted us with various offers of help and advice, but we decided to redesign it ourselves! It follows our own guidelines for website design and layout; it meets web-accessibility guidelines and will hopefully act as a central resource (or in plain English, a tool that everyone can use) for anyone interested in plain English as a whole.

Chrissie Maher OBE, our founder, hopes that the public will flock to the site in order to read her 'blog' (a kind of on-line diary). Chrissie said "It seems strange perhaps that the word 'blog' appears underneath the words Plain English Campaign. But 'blog' is a new word that is used



every day now. So our website reflects changes in our language with explanations of these new words. I hope that all users of our website, both regulars and newcomers, will find the new design much easier to use."

The website is more 'interactive'

than before, to allow visitors to comment more on plain English issues. The site features a questionnaire which will allow us to provide the media with more accurate statistics about what the public think about labelling, forms, financial jargon and other issues.

Crystal Mark to hit 14,000th document

Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark will appear for the 14,000th time in September 2006. We thought that we would take the opportunity to modernise the design of the logo to make it even more attractive to organisations wanting to display a commitment to plain language.

When we first thought up the idea of the Crystal Mark, we didn't really



think anyone would go for it. Our first design only allowed for a four-figure number to go in the top corner, which made it difficult to read. It might look different, but the message is still the same. No jargon and no gobbledygook!

With the Government itself seeming more prepared to think about the language in their documents, it is a good time to reinforce the plain English message. We hope that having a more attractive and user-friendly website will improve our public image and help promote the use of plain language. The internet is part of everybody's lives nowadays and we feel that it is important that it is accessible to everyone.

If you have any comments, suggestions or criticisms about the new site, please let us know.

Plain English Awards

The 27th Plain English Awards take place on 12 December. As always, we are looking for the best examples of plain English and the worst examples of gobbledygook.

The Golden Bull awards are given to gobbledygook that hides in public documents. If you send in an entry in this category you will not be identified unless you want to be!

The 'Foot in Mouth' award is given to the person responsible for the year's most baffling comment. Last year, of course, it went to Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan, who now has the dubious honour of winning the award twice. We already have some cracking candidates for this year's award, but keep sending us your entries.

More importantly, we recognise the best plain English of the year in various categories. The Plain English awards are given to the best public documents, while the Inside Write award is given to the best internal government documents. We also give awards to the media for the year's best news reporting, and to the best website. For a full list of categories and a history of the awards, visit our website.

To enter a document for any of the awards, please post full details to the address on the front of the magazine, or email it to us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Shankly is King of the Quotes

The late Bill Shankly, former manager of Liverpool Football Club, and a legend throughout the football world and beyond, has come top in a Plain English Campaign survey of 'best-loved' football quotations. His comment that football is 'more important than life and death' received by far the most votes.

We surveyed our 11,000 supporters across the world, and received a great deal of votes — and also other quotations which we had not got on our list. The second-placed and third-placed quotes are more baffling than plain. Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne was narrowly pipped to second place by Eric Cantona's 'seagulls' quote.

Chrissie Maher said she was "delighted, though not surprised, that people still find Shankly's quote so powerful. He had a humour and a charisma that lives on to this day."

The top 10 footballing quotes are as follows.

1. "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I'm very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that."
(Bill Shankly)

2. "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it's because they think



Bill Shankly celebrates another trophy

sardines will be thrown into the sea." (Eric Cantona)

3. "I never predict anything, and I never will." (Paul Gascoigne)

4. "They think it's all over... it is now!" (Kenneth Wolstenholme)

5. "Do I not like that."
(Graham Taylor)

6. "I think this could be our best victory over Germany since the war." (John Motson)

7. "It's a funny old game."
(Jimmy Greaves)

8. "I spent most of my money on birds, booze and fast cars. The rest I just squandered." (George Best)

9. "The World Cup is a truly international event." (John Motson)

10. "If Glenn Hoddle said one word to his team at half time, it was concentration and focus."
(Ron Atkinson)

ASA tells Carphone Warehouse to look up the meaning of the word 'free'

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has upheld a number of complaints about Carphone Warehouse's 'Talk Talk' offer. The retailer had widely publicised its 'free' broadband service in the media, but the ASA found that some of its advertising was, at best, misleading. In Issue

64, we wrote about how the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) code was clear when it came to advertising things as 'free', if the cost of those things are included in the package price.

Users of the Talk Talk package found that there was a connection

charge, a minimum subscription period of 18 months, and a disconnection fee. The company also claimed that broadband was 'free forever', which the ASA ruled was 'misleading'.

The retailer has been told it must not run the same adverts in future.

Progress at

Hope for 'plain English' laws after Coroner's Bill

It's nearly 30 years since Chrissie Maher and her supporters shredded official documents in Parliament Square, and the Gobbledygook Monster rampaged through Whitehall. Now a new parliamentary bill has appeared in the Commons, complete with a 'plain English' translation. The Coroner Reform Draft Bill was published on Monday 12 June, and swept away years of tradition by providing a translation next to the legislation.

The Minister for Constitutional Affairs, Harriet Harman, requested the move, saying that it was time the public could read the laws passed in their name.

"Many ministers, let alone MPs, find bills in the current form hard going, so I don't know how on earth the public is expected to understand them," she said.

Ms Harman said she hoped that one day, every bill will carry its own translation.

"This will help the public to join in the debate. I haven't spoken to a single minister about this without them saying they want their bills in this form."

Here at the Campaign we welcomed the idea. For years we have argued that people have a right to understand the laws that affect them. Chrissie Maher said:

"We have been banging away at



Once upon a time: shredding documents in Parliament Square, 1979

the doors of Parliament for decades, trying to convince ministers to make their legislation more accessible. I hope that this historic step marks the start of a

renewed commitment to plain English and an end to indecipherable documents." The translation deciphered the 81 clauses and the schedules

last

carries translation

contained in the 128-page Bill, and explained how the coroner's system was to be reformed. It was written by parliamentary draftsmen, who were said to be delighted with their first effort.

It is fair to say that some of the legislation could have been translated even more clearly, but it was an encouraging start. More importantly, it marked the beginning of a real commitment to make public documents accessible to everyone.

We have always argued that plain English in the law is possible and it seems that this is a sign that some politicians agree.

Still, it was clear from the media that there was a mixed reaction from some corners, with some cynically suggesting that the move was a publicity stunt. But it was surprising, to us, that anyone could think the translation was a bad thing.

We contacted Harriet Harman's office directly, to ask what the reaction had been like from their point of view. They revealed that they had had several compliments from stakeholders — coroners and those within the service (and who fund it). They also had positive comments following consultations with voluntary groups.

Marcel Berlins, the legal commentator, wrote in his column in the Guardian:

Clause 32: Regulations with respect to expenditure

(1) The Lord Chancellor may by regulations make provision with respect to expenditure incurred by senior coroners, area coroners and assistant coroners.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), regulations under this section may make provision -

- (a) for accounts or evidence relating to expenditure to be provided to appropriate audiences;
- (b) for or in connection with the reimbursement by appropriate authorities of expenditure of such description as may be specified in the regulations;
- (c) for or in connection with appeals relating to decisions with respect to reimbursement.

Clause 32: Regulations with respect to expenditure

Section 27 of the Coroners Act 1988 requires coroners to produce accounts to their appointing local authority, and makes provision as to the funds from which reimbursements should be paid. Section 27A requires the council to indemnify the coroner for expenses reasonably incurred in connection with his functions, or in relation to disputing a claim made against him. Provision about such matters will now be contained in secondary legislation under this clause.

(Above: The Coroner's Reform Bill, with translation)

(Below: We take it a little further)

Clause 32: Regulations with respect to expenditure (spending)

Under section 27 of the Coroners Act 1988, a coroner must send the local authority that appointed them an invoice for their fees and expenses. Section 27 also sets out the local authority funds these invoices should be paid from.

Under section 27a, the council must pay the coroner's reasonable expenses for:

- acting as coroner; and
- disputing any claim made against them as a coroner.

"I've now had a chance of studying the bill's English translation. It's clearer than I anticipated. There are still words and concepts that have not been easily converted into "people speak", but on the whole reading the right-hand "English" side not only gives you a good idea

of what the bill says but tells you what changes it will make to the current system."

It is now up to those in power to make sure that this is not a 'one-off' and that all future documents of this kind are as clear as possible!

The article below appeared in the Yorkshire Post following the news of the Coroner's Draft Reform Bill translation. It was written by one of the Campaign team.

On Monday this week, years of tradition were supposedly overturned when the Coroner's Draft Reform Bill was published. The bill contained several changes to what had been described as an 'archaic' system, but much publicity was given to the fact that it was the first to contain a 'plain English' translation, alongside each legal clause. The Constitutional Affairs Minister, Harriet Harman, had insisted on the move, arguing that "it was time the public could read the laws passed in their name."

The language used in Parliament and in the legal profession has always seemed exclusive. Stuffed with jargon, gobbledeygook and sentences that lose the ordinary reader within seconds, official documents seem designed to be accessible only to those in power. The draftsmen responsible for the Coroner's Draft Reform Bill have aimed to change that reputation by providing a friendlier, clearer version.

So, did they manage it? The general consensus among the media and some politicians seems to be 'Could do better'. There are many good things about the first attempt at 'plain English-ing' the law, and it is misguided to dismiss it as a waste of time. But many legal terms such as 'indemnify' and 'resumption' have been left unexplained. Only those with a reasonable standard of education would genuinely be able to say they now understand the new bill clearly. Some commentators have gone so far as to say that the translations are misleading, as some terms have not been translated accurately.

Some senior figures resistant to plain language argue that the language of law is too complicated and cannot be simplified. To most of us, the words 'unlawful' and 'illegal' equate to roughly the same thing, but in the eyes of the law there are subtle differences and specific meanings. This is one of the problems that groups such as Plain English Campaign have come up against in their attempts to persuade officials to be clearer. The language in legal documents has been the same for centuries. Those who are highly paid for their ability to decipher it are somewhat reluctant to move to a simpler, more concise language that anyone can understand.

Any sector of society, from journalists to computer technicians, likes to communicate in a language that only those 'in the know' can translate. And, in many cases, it is acceptable. After all, most of us are not interested or even capable of learning what the various electrical parts of our mobile phones are called. But when those 'doors' are open, and that language is forced upon us, it alienates us. We have a right to understand politics and the law.

It is possible to rewrite complex legislation so that it is clear and lucid. Documents and public notices do not have to be written in a complicated way to be effective. In fact, quite the opposite. Much research has shown that people are more receptive to orders and rulings if they are delivered to them in a clear manner. Some years ago, British Aerospace, with our help, managed to redraft a 150-page international leasing agreement into 50 pages. This saved months of

discussion with their clients and their lawyers. In 1999, the then Lord Chancellor, after years of pressure from us, abolished the use of Latin and legal jargon in England's civil courts, saying he wanted a "commitment to making access to justice a reality, not a slogan." In fact, even as far back as Victorian times, plain English was present in the law. The 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act contains the words "It is an offence to cause a riot".

Anybody who has just filled in their income tax self-assessment form will know that there is still an awfully long way to go before all public documents are easy to understand. But progress has been, and will continue to be made. As long as those who are responsible for writing future legislation learn from the Coroners Bill, and make sure that their documents are as clear as possible, there is real hope. Perhaps one day, the mountains of red tape will finally collapse.

Politicians have long been known for their ability to cloud their speeches in impenetrable gobbledeygook, yet wonder why the voting booths are empty on polling day. All three party leaders have publicly expressed their support for plain language recently. Many other MPs have talked of a desire to re-engage the public with politics by making their debates and documents more accessible. The only way to encourage people to participate is to make it easy for them to join in. Harriet Harman has sown a seed of change within Parliament. We must hope that her colleagues in power allow it to grow.

Bits and pieces

Politicians speak everyday English after all!

A recent study has found that, despite what we thought, many of Britain's top politicians speak 'everyday English'. The computer study, which was developed by business consultants Optimum, analysed the content of speeches, interviews and press releases against a 'core vocabulary' of 17,500 English words which are used most often in ordinary speech. The people analysed lost points for using jargon and complicated, lengthy sentences.

Former Prime Minister, John Major, came out top among politicians, though according to Optimum, none could match the 'everydayness' of an 'Eastenders' script. Tony Blair came top out of the current major party leaders, with David Cameron in second place and Sir Menzies Campbell bringing up the rear.

A recent speech by the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, landed him a score of 84.6% - meaning one in every six words he used are not 'everyday English'.

Malcolm Galfe of Optimum, who said that the survey was meant light-heartedly but with a serious purpose, said:

"There is increasing concern about the number of people who feel distant from politics and politicians. David Puttnam's recent Hansard Commission report spoke of a need for Parliament to "reconnect with the public". How politicians communicate with people must be a part of this."

Talk me through it

Anyone who has bought a video camera, a mobile phone, a games console or even a flat-pack coffee table has at some point been confused by product instructions. However, help is at hand.

Talk Me Through It was set up four years ago by entrepreneur Crispin Thomas, to help people who could not work out how to use their electrical goods and gadgets. At the start, it operated from a tiny office in Bath, England, but now employs over 80 staff and handles thousands of calls every day. The company translates technical jargon such as 'Call in Absence Indicator' ('You have missed a call') and blames manufacturers' jargon for most of its calls.

Thomas says "Companies are competing to make more and more complicated, sophisticated products. But people are not rocket scientists."

Sporting plain English

"I am a great believer that if you don't get the ball up to the hole — then it doesn't go in."

(Golfer Colin Montgomerie)

Lost in translation

"This machine packs into the battery the each opening the confidential waiting for the first time 10 seconds, need the machine from measure to complete to grow to press to open the machine key the square can show, the inconvenient place begs your pardon." (on an MP3 player)

I'm sorry, I haven't a 'boys in blue' (clue)

Anyone who has ever come across a police report or statement will know that they are rarely what you would describe as 'concise'. We remember fondly the response of one police force in Wales, who gave the following response when asked how crimes were recorded.

"A crime committed by a stranger

is merely the inverse of the stranger indicator and does not exist separately to this indicator."

Meanwhile, a former American police officer turned novelist, translates police jargon which appears in reports and police logs.

She says "A regular person would write: I walked up to the car and told the guy to get out. He wouldn't get out and started yelling at me,

so I yanked him out and threw him on the ground,"

"A cop would write: I approached the vehicle and ordered the suspect out. He failed to comply and became increasingly verbally un-cooperative. In light of this, and for officer safety reasons, I physically removed him from the vehicle and placed him prone on the ground in accordance with departmental use of force policy."

Training dates for 2006

For more details, please call our training administrator, Heidi Selkirk on 01663 744409. Or e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Belfast

Tuesday 17 October
(Plain English)

Birmingham

Tuesday 19 September
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 20 September

Edinburgh

Wednesday 11 October
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 12 October
(Plain English)

London

Thursday 17 August
(Plain English)
Tuesday 12 September
(Writing for websites)
Thursday 14 September
(Plain English)
Thursday 21 September
(Plain English and forms design)
Tuesday 26 September
(Report writing)
Tuesday 10 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 11 October
(Plain English)
Thursday 9 November
(Plain English)
Wednesday 15 November
(Writing medical information)
Tuesday 21 November
(Advanced grammar)

London (continued)

Tuesday 12 December
(Plain English)

Manchester

Wednesday 16 August
(Plain English)
Tuesday 24 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 25 October
(Plain English)
Thursday 7 December
(Plain English)

Our on-line courses are available on our website at www.plainenglishtraining.com

The next issue of Plain English will be available towards the end of September 2006

These organisations have become corporate members of Plain English Campaign

AQA
Genesis Housing Group
Healthcare Commission
Shoreline Housing Partnership
Solihull Community Housing

South Northamptonshire Council
The Shepherds Friendly Society Ltd

Welcome aboard!

The following organisations have recently earned their first Crystal Mark

AG Care
Ann Conroy Trust
Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ Ltd
Bolton at Home
BP Pensions Limited
Business in the Community
Cannons Health and Fitness Limited
Children's Workforce Development Council
Clyde Valley Housing Association
Coca-Cola Enterprises Limited
dating agency.com Limited
G4S Justice Services
GE Money Home Lending
Glasgow City Council
Hull City Council
Massey's Agency
Norris Lincoln Adcom
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
People 1st (Slough) Limited
Sainsbury's Supermarkets Limited
Scottish Consumer Association
Town and Country Housing Group
TrustMark
West Midlands Fire Service
World Bowls Limited

Help the public to understand your documents - with a Crystal Mark

Nearly 14,000 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

We will not allow the Crystal Mark to appear on any document unless our testing shows it can be read, understood and acted upon by the intended audience.

If you have a document you would like us to look at, and would like a quote for the work, please contact Tony Maher on 01663 744409 or e-mail info@plainenglish.co.uk.