

# Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman  
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## Capturing the Language - Labour's Agenda

Every day, in a myriad of ways, nature reminds us of her "Framing" is the political left's new buzzword for what used to be called brainwashing. It has been developed into an art form by George Lakoff, Professor of Linguistics at Berkley University and forms the basis of a paper prepared by communications consultant Claire Curran for last month's Labour Party's Southland Regional Conference. Called "Language Matters: Setting agendas - taking change of the debate", the paper describes the necessity of capturing the language for the center-left if Labour is to win the next election. It provides an insight into their communication strategy.

The key message delivered in the paper is that Labour must take control of the language: *"This paper is about Labour taking greater charge of the language of debate and discussion in New Zealand. It is called 're-framing' and it means gaining (or regaining) the use of concepts and phrases that spark public and media interest. If you control the language, you control the message. The media doesn't create the message, they run with it"*.

This concept is, of course, the central tenet of political correctness, a mechanism developed in the 1920s to help advance communism. Writer and long-time commentator on communism in Cuba, Agustin Blazquez, in an article "Political Correctness: the scourge of our times", describes it this way: *"Political Correctness remains just what it was intended to be: a sophisticated and dangerous form of censorship and oppression, imposed upon the citizenry with the ultimate goal of manipulating, brainwashing and destroying our society"* (see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)).

The Curran paper explains: *"Despite being in power for more than six years, Labour's framework is not clearly understood by a confused and sometimes unhappy electorate. In the 2005 election, Labour's main*

*opponent National was very close to victory and by many accounts could/should have won. The vast majority of public attention during the 2005 election focused on National's agenda, NOT Labour's. It's message and framework was more coherent and struck a chord with those in the electorate who had been disenchanted with Labour. Why National failed can be endlessly debated but the signals are that (unless National Implodes) Labour needs to set a much clearer agenda to win next time"*.

The paper advises Labour that it needs to develop some new ideas – a fresh approach - that will excite the voters and commentators and re-capture the debate from National. That is undoubtedly the reason why Labour used the Budget to promote three new key themes: economic transformation, family security and national identity. Curran explains: *"It's all about Labour Party members understanding how to frame a discussion and debate and how to take charge of the language we use. Labour's ideas are the ones that should shape the nation's future. One of Labour's key goals should be to define the public debate in our terms. We need to be able to explain the moral and value system of New Zealand's social progressives in our terms. The political programme should be based on those values"*.

She goes on to advise against using expressions that opposition parties use: *"Learn how to use Labour language. Don't mention their terms; rephrase the questions asked to allow you to answer in your terms. Every time you say the words PC, tax cuts, welfare dependency, racially-based policies the framework of the opposition is invoked and your framework is so much harder to introduce or discuss. We need to find other words than theirs to describe National's policies"*. She gives some examples: *"When we talk*

about tax what is the framework that most people draw upon? Let's look at two frameworks:

1. Where tax is something we pay too much of, especially in times of economic prosperity. Instead of paying tax to promote 'big government' we should pay less tax and share the benefits among the people who made the economic prosperity happen.

2. Where tax is an investment in the future .... through the highways systems, scientific and medical establishments and research, the communications system, the airline system, the education system. Taxes result in assets for all of us – schools, hospitals, airlines, highways etc that come from wise tax investments. "In the first framework, tax is generally bad, we pay too much of it, it bolsters 'big government' and it should be distributed back among the people who originally paid it. In the second framework tax is wise; it is an investment for the future; results in infrastructure and is an essential component of our society; it is a glue that holds us together".

To re-frame the debate about tax, Curran advises: "Develop a new economic language targeting middle New Zealand householders. Talk about the economic impact on their ordinary lives. Talk about the common financial decisions and tasks that people confront such as paying their bills, buying groceries, whether you can afford to take your child to the doctor again..." and so on.

The Prime Minister can be seen to be using this approach in Parliament. During question time on May 23rd, in response to a question from Don Brash

*The Curran paper shows how the Labour Party intends to capture the hearts and mind of New Zealanders by controlling the language of politics.*

asking why tax cuts are unaffordable when we are running massive tax surpluses, she answered: "Family tax relief is indeed affordable, and it is much appreciated. I have a letter from a woman who writes: Today, I received confirmation we're entitled to family assistance of \$85 a week. Now we can go to the doctor when we need to, get a haircut when needed, and don't have to go without meat and the groceries. Thank you for Working for Families".

Also mentioned in the paper is the suggestion that New Zealand should be presented "as a role model for the world", and promoted as "a country that stops talking itself down". This concept of course has led to the attack on Don Brash for his slogan: the Labour Government believes there is a place for tax cuts - it's called Australia. Clark called him unpatriotic and accused him of talking the country down.

Brash responded with his "Proud to be a Kiwi" speech (see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)). But whether it is wise to have moved the tax cut battle on Labour's ground is another matter! What we can expect in the months to come from Labour is a 'makeover' – a different style and approach complete with a persuasive new vocabulary. Thanks to Clare Curran, at least we will know what to be watching out for!

*This week's poll asks, Do you think Labour is running an orchestrated campaign to control the language of politics?*

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