

# LISTENER

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## George Lansbury

IT is one of the minor tragedies of the war that the Rt. Hon. George Lansbury should have died in the middle of a struggle that he worked all his days to prevent. The nearest parallel to it, oddly enough, was the equally tragic end, early in the last war, of Lord Roberts—a patriot of violently different colour, but as passionately anxious to save the world by one method as Lansbury was to save it by another. Both, if we take a short view, died frustrated and ignored.

But to Lansbury at least there were no short views. He was a Christian, wrestling with the powers of darkness, and as recently as Easter of this year, he expressed unshaken faith in a Resurrection—for himself, for his country, and for the world. "My faith as a Christian grows stronger," he wrote from his bed. "The children of men will one day rise supreme, and with confidence and faith build a civilisation worthy of the knowledge and understanding of those we think of as the children of one Father."

It is strange language for a statesman to use in 1940, but it was the only language he knew. All his life he trusted in the weapons of the spirit—against Mussolini, even against Hitler. What he said to them when he went personally to each two years ago to plead for continued peace, no one will ever know fully, but he would never agree that he has wasted his time. Perhaps he did worse than waste his time. Perhaps he strengthened the belief of both that the English would never fight. Some have said it; many have thought it; but no one has ever said or thought that where he failed someone else might have succeeded.

And we must not forget that his international activities were merely an extension into a wider field of methods applied for a life-time at home. Twice he went to gaol for his convictions. At the height of his career he gave up the leadership of his Party when it voted for sanctions against Italy. He could bow to facts but he could not compromise with truth as he saw it, and his life as a result ended in apparent frustration. But he had this advantage over Lord Roberts, that he had no sense of failure, and it would be rash to declare that he was hopelessly deluded. If there is any hope for the world at all it must have its roots in honesty, and if Westminster has seen a more honest man than George Lansbury the world has not heard his name.

# BAD LANGUAGE

## Words Like Bolsters And Phrases Like Feather-Beds

[Abridgment of a BBC Talk by A. P. HERBERT, M.P.,  
printed in the English "Listener"]

FEW of us nowadays, I think, would say that in war time words—and men of words—don't matter. You remember Nelson's signal: "England expects that every man will do his duty." Good! But suppose that the signal had been drafted by one of our fat-word-breeders in Whitehall, that signal would have run thus: "England anticipates—nobody can say 'expects' to-day—that with regard to the current emergency, personnel will duly implement their obligations in accordance with the functions allocated to their respective age-groups."

Well, would anyone have said then that words didn't matter? No; it would have been said that the author of that verbose, vague and suety signal was not fit to lead his fellow-countrymen into battle.

Herr Hitler, I suppose, may fairly be described as a man of action. I hope, I'm sure, that in saying so much I shall not be thought guilty of annoying the enemy. But he's far from despising the use of words. Here at home no one who was delighted in the power and precision of Mr. Winston Churchill's broadsides will say that words don't matter; and it's no accident that the same statesman who in speech has scored so many bull's-eyes is fixed as well in the public mind as a rock in purpose and a dynamo in action. He has shown you that it is not always necessary to speak of big things in long, woolly words.

### Simplicity Means Something

Some of us knew this before, but to others it has come as a shock of surprise. And that shows how low we have sunk in the world of words. You have learned in recent years to expect any speech or writing about public affairs to be bulging with words like bolsters and phrases like feather-beds—gross Latin words like "decontamination," phrases like "mutual bi-lateral non-aggression," and so on. So when Mr. Churchill concludes an address with that simple but electric passage, "Man the ships, till the fields, sweep the mines, guard the streets, kiss the girls," and so on, you sit up and say, "My hat, all this means something after all; moreover, this man understands us."

### Woolly Words And Woolly Minds

The woolly word may reveal the woolly mind; the obscure or cloudy word may conceal the tricky purpose or the absence of a plan. I am told that outside a famous barracks in London this notice was recently displayed: "Tenders are invited for the disposal of manure accumulated in respect of military animals." "Manure accumulated in respect of military animals" — in other words, "manure" — and I could make it even shorter.

Now, to condemn this sort of thing is not merely to be a fussy grammarian or pedantic scholar, to prefer effective and fitting language, or to disapprove of wasting public ink and paper. That notice betrays the character of the man who composed it. I can see the fellow, and I had better not say what I see. But we are entitled to suspect the character and competence of any department, any part, and any politician who stuffs the public mind with woolly, half-baked, flabby or slushy words.

### Why "Evacuation"?

In this war, I think, the classic example is "evacuation," and all the hasty litter of mongrel expressions which have sprung round it—"evacuee," the "self-evacuating" person, "re-evacuation," and so on. Nothing can be done, perhaps, to kill "evacuation"

now, but unless we abuse its wretched parents with a will, they will gaily give birth to some similar monstrosity to-morrow. No doubt about it, this was a wanton and brutish crime against good sense and the King's English, committed by the King's Government. And there was not the least excuse. "Evacuate" means—and still means—"to make empty," quite empty. "Evacuate" is what the doctor tries to do when he uses a stomach-pump. Now when the whole of a garrison retired from a fort and left it to the enemy, that was reasonably described as an "evacuation" — though even then, "abandonment" would have been a better word. But you don't say that you have "evacuated" a pint pot when you have drunk half a pint. At no time did the Government intend that London, Liverpool or Manchester should be "evacuated" — that is, "made empty."

### Too Many Latin Labels

What I hate is to hear the simple workman or waterman in the pub compelled to speak of the intimate things in his life—the departure of his wife, the care of his children—in ugly, alien and unnatural terms, simply because some official in the Ministry of Sanitation enjoys the sound of lengthy Latin words, or is too lazy to select an English one.

"Where's Martha, Bill? She ain't evacuated, surely?"

"No, Bert; she's a self-evacuating person, see!"

"Oh, 'opped it, did she? You're lucky; my old girl was Government evacuated, but she's gone and de-evacuated 'erself."

"That's bad, Bert; what'll you do?"

"Do? Why, de-re-evacuate 'er, of course."

I do not like it. Nor do you. I am no enemy of the Latin tongue. I am humbly grateful that, in a small way, I had a chance to be a Latin scholar. I admire and love that language; I strongly advocate the study of it. But there's no good reason why every new thing should be given a long Latin label. If we want to speak of "rat catching," do not let us say "deratisation" as our officials and seamen have to to-day in every harbour of the kingdom. When we mean no more than "cleansing," why say, and make the nation say, "decontamination"?

Distrust these long-legged Latin words. Too often at the other end there is an empty skull—or should I say, an "evacuated" skull? Distrust, too, this cloud of stinging words that end in "ist" and "ism"—"Fascist," "Bolshevist," "Imperialist." Ask those who use them what they mean.

### Great Things Can Be Said Simply

But I should prefer, as I have said, to do without such alien labels in politics at all. Let us—where we can—preserve and honour the fire, the force, the freshness of our tongue—with, of course, such reasonable contributions as we require from others. In that tongue, after all, great things can be said in few and slender words. How did King George the Fifth speak of the British Empire? "In these days," he said in 1935, "when fear and preparation for war are again astir in the world, let us be thankful that quiet government and peace prevail over so large a part of the earth's surface, and that under our flag of freedom so many millions eat their daily bread, in far distant lands and climates, with none to make them afraid."

Is that Imperialism? I cannot tell. Is it good English? Yes, simple and sturdy, proud but plain.