

Downerspeak

By Don Aitkin

Those who have become used to the sight and sound of our Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade will know that over the years he has begun to adopt a strange language. It is not quite speaking in tongues, for there we speak as the spirit moves us.

No, he has begun to sound sometimes like a diplomat, and diplomats speak a muted language, where things are never quite what they seem. It might be argued that from time to time this was true of Mr Downer's speeches even before he rose to his present rank.

Alexander Downer has two modes. One is off-the-cuff and to the camera, and here he is vaguely threatening. I feel that his minders in the Department must wince when they hear him.

The other is the consequence of Mr Downer's having associated with diplomats for a long time. I call it 'Downerspeak', and what follows is a short guide. Those who have spent some time in universities will see that it has some relation to the language used in halls of learning.

Its essence is the capacity to say something so clearly yet so imprecisely that whatever the consequences the speaker can argue that he said the right thing, or at least warned of it. Let's take a straightforward situation.

An event has occurred — the explosion of a nuclear device, for example — and the spokesperson for the nation concerned has explained that its purpose is to explore the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

A good diplomat will not say 'What a crock!' or something of that kind. Rather he or she will describe it as 'an interesting interpretation'.

The apparent invasion of another country by one of our friends, on the other hand, will be described as 'a welcome contribution to regional stability.'

You see how it is done? Here is a set of Downerspeak statements, with (in brackets) what a panel of experts argue is the correct meaning. The statements are about an event that has just occurred.

'The reasons for this are obscure' (We have no idea what is happening.)

'We have made a reappraisal of the situation' (We have changed our mind.)

'Our information suggests' (We guess that...)

'We are reliably informed' (Our current opinion is)

'A realistic assessment would indicate' (What we really believe is...)

'An honest assessment would be" (The truth is that)

Now some Downerspeak on action — what ought to happen now that the event has occurred.

'We intend to adopt a low profile' (We're not going to do anything)

'We will adopt a cautious approach' (We won't do any more than we have to)

'We have had a meaningful dialogue' (We've talked with our friends, and we all agree)

'We have had productive talks' (The other side is now swinging around)

'We have had useful talks' (We're still talking with them but we're not getting anywhere)

'They have adopted a position' (They are going to be very difficult about this)

'We have tried to create an awareness' (We've spelled it out in the simplest words we know)

'We think this may have the effect' (This will certainly have the effect)

'This may disturb the balance' (This will ruin everything)

Finally, a glimpse of the private language used by diplomats to other diplomats, some of which ultimately creeps into Downerspeak.

'You are advised' (You'd better do this)

'You are strongly advised' (Do this or else!)

'While taking the point' (We have no intention of agreeing with you on this — a usage common in academic discussion, too)

'It would be most helpful if you would advise' (For heaven's sake get off your backsides and tell us what we have to do)

Of course, this is only to scratch the surface. There is much more. But we ought to thank the Minister for giving us an insight into his strange world.

We should do it diplomatically, which is to convey the assurance of our most distinguished consideration. No, Alexander didn't invent this one — it's an old French diplomatic flourish.