

PLAGUE OF PLATITUDES

THE GAP BETWEEN POLITICAL LANGUAGE AND
GOVERNING REALITY

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SUMMARY

THE PLAGUE of Platitudes argues that Britain's political problem is not merely that politicians use empty language, but that they increasingly mistake such language for policy. Platitudes are phrases that sound morally or practically sufficient while avoiding the questions that make policy real: mechanism, money, sequencing, institutional capacity, resistance, trade-offs and time.

The essay shows how this habit appears in live politics, where words such as 'change', 'public control', 'wealth tax', 'rejoin Europe' and 'price gouging' often point to real problems while concealing the machinery needed to address them. It then asks why these phrases prosper. They help politicians avoid conflict, help the public process complexity quickly, and help the media package politics into portable drama.

The media sits at the centre of the argument because it should test political language before it becomes public meaning. Sometimes it does; too often it amplifies instead. The cost is practical failure and falling trust. Britain's problems are not solved by better phrases. When words repeatedly fail to become outcomes, the public learns to distrust the next promise before it is even made.

ANOTHER PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

I have been trying to understand why the political process keeps failing: why promises dissolve on first contact with reality, why trust has drained from politics, and why the media so often amplifies rather than interrogates. Political parties speak the language of certainty and hope while inheriting a government machine they cannot control. The current Labour turmoil adds another piece to the puzzle.

In *Goodbye Trust*, I argued that Britain's institutions were losing trust not because of one fashionable explanation – woke, Brexit, Trump, social media, take your pick – but because too many of them had become incompetent, conceited, evasive or detached from the people they claimed to serve. Later essays pushed the argument further. The media did not merely report political failure; it often shaped the assumptions through which failure was understood. Politics had become theatre. Voters were not innocent spectators, but participants in the show. The state itself looked less like a machine waiting for competent ministers and more like an ageing contraption of courts, regulators, quangos, departments, markets, legal duties, spending commitments and public expectations.

That was depressing enough. Alas, it may not be the whole problem.

This essay adds a further conclusion: politicians do not merely speak in platitudes; they

increasingly mistake them for policies capable of addressing the UK's economic and social condition. The issue is not that politicians simplify. Of course they do. They have to. Politics needs compression. The public needs intelligible language. Democracy cannot operate entirely in footnotes, spreadsheets and departmental annexes, however much some civil servants might prefer it.

The trouble begins when compression is mistaken for thought. A phrase that once worked as presentation becomes treated as analysis. A slogan designed to survive an interview becomes the mental container for a policy. These phrases may point towards real concerns. Some may even point in the right direction. But pointing is not designing. Direction is not mechanism. Moral clarity is not operational capacity.

While I was developing this essay, two substantial interventions appeared from writers far closer to the Labour Party than I am: Tony Blair and Tom McTague, editor-in-chief of the *New Statesman*. Their pieces were not about platitudes as such. But both circled the same larger problem: British politics is failing to produce a governing analysis equal to the condition of the country. Blair argued that Labour's problem is not personality, communication or insufficient assertion of values, but the absence of a worked-out, coherent plan for a fast-changing world. McTague put the matter more starkly: Britain is choosing delusion over reality while Westminster dissolves into intrigue.

I use them later not as authorities to hide behind, but as useful witnesses. If people writing from Labour's own intellectual neighbourhood are saying something similar, the problem is not simply the irritation of a detached critic. Labour is the current specimen because Labour is in office and in trouble. The same disease exists elsewhere. The Conservatives spent years proving that phrases about sovereignty, levelling up, global Britain and taking back control did not necessarily contain the machinery of government. Reform offers its own sharper vocabulary of national restoration and elite betrayal. The Greens wrap radical redistribution and lifestyle regulation in the warmer language of justice, compassion and ecological urgency. The Liberal Democrats, when noticed, offer a different dialect of reasonable-sounding vagueness.

The vocabulary changes. The habit remains.

This is not a generic rant about politicians saying silly things. Politics has always had windy speeches, evasive slogans and phrases designed to make mediocrity sound noble. The more serious question is what happens when the gap between words and reality widens so far that the words no longer merely disguise weakness but help produce it. Bad language then becomes more than bad communication. It becomes a way of not thinking.

THE PLAGUE IDENTIFIED

A platitude is not simply a familiar phrase or a simple political slogan. Politicians have to simplify complex ideas. I get that. The public cannot be expected to read a Treasury model, a planning consultation, a migration forecast or a departmental implementation plan every time a minister speaks. The problem begins when simplification becomes detached from any mechanism that could make it happen. A platitude is a phrase that sounds morally, emotionally or practically sufficient while avoiding the questions that would make it real: how, by whom, at what cost, against what resistance, over what timescale, with what trade-offs, and what breaks if it is tried?

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That distinction matters because politics cannot function without compression. A slogan is not automatically stupid. Some slogans identify a real action, direction or blockage. They help voters grasp the shape of an argument without having to master every detail beneath it. The question is not whether political language is simple. It is whether the simplicity remains connected to anything that could happen.

A useful political phrase should be the visible tip of something larger. Beneath it there should be a chain of thought: a diagnosis, a mechanism, a timetable, an assessment of cost, some recognition of who loses, and some idea of what happens when resistance arrives. A platitude is different. It has no submerged structure. It floats. It gives the impression of seriousness without the burden of design.

This is why some of the most dangerous platitudes do not sound especially fluffy. They do not always come dressed as 'fairness', 'renewal', 'hope' or 'change'. Some sound harder-edged. Rejoin this. Tax that. Build these. Save those. Raise billions here. Cut billions there. The grammar looks practical. There is a verb, a destination, a target or an enemy. But a verb is not a mechanism. A destination is not a route. An enemy is not a substitute for economics.

The political class helps this happen because much of it speaks the same shared code. Politicians, advisers, journalists, think-tankers and policy specialists can pass the same phrase around while each supplies a different private meaning. Everyone thinks they know what is being discussed, or at least knows how to behave as if they do. The language becomes fluent before it becomes clear.

The most useful distinction is between the speech world and the system world. In the speech world, a phrase succeeds if it is memorable, morally legible, useful against opponents, easy to headline and easy to repeat. In the system world, a policy succeeds only if it can survive budgets, markets, courts, laws, delivery capacity, incentives, public behaviour, unintended consequences and time.

The trouble with modern politics is not that the speech world exists. It always has. The trouble is that it has become dominant. It rewards language before it has been tested. It asks first whether a claim lands, not whether it works. Once that happens, the boundary between communication and thought starts to collapse. Politicians do not only sell slogans to voters. They begin to think inside them.

The plague, then, is not merely the spread of empty phrases through speeches, interviews and headlines. It is their migration into political thought itself. Platitudes have become the operating language of politics – almost its operating system. Once politicians begin to conceptualise the country through phrases that avoid mechanism, time, cost and resistance, policy becomes rhetoric waiting to fail.

THE OLD FEAR: WHEN WORDS REPLACE THOUGHT

The fear that political language can rot public thought is not new. It did not begin with social media, twenty-four-hour news, podcasts, focus groups or the modern politician's trick of speaking without meaning. The worry is older and more serious: that language does not merely describe political reality. It helps construct what people think reality is.

That is why Orwell still matters. He is usually invoked whenever somebody wants to complain about official jargon, bureaucratic evasion or the latest grotesque phrase produced by a public body. Fair enough. Orwell gave us a durable warning about political language

that disguises violence, softens failure, hides agency and gives an appearance of solidity. But the more important point is not that politicians use ugly or evasive words. It is that bad language makes bad thinking easier.

A phrase can blur responsibility. Mistakes are 'made'. Lessons are 'learnt'. Hard choices are 'necessary'. Communities are 'engaged'. Progress is 'delivered'. Problems are 'addressed'. Something has happened, apparently, but nobody quite knows who did it, what moved, what changed or who should be held responsible. The sentence has the shape of action while emptying action of its human content. In a bureaucracy, this is useful; in politics, it is indispensable.

Walter Lippmann sharpens a different part of the problem. Most people do not encounter politics directly. They do not see the machinery of departments, fiscal modelling, immigration processing, planning appeals, procurement delays, welfare incentives, court decisions, bond-market reactions or NHS management systems. They encounter simplified pictures of those things. They live politically through representations – headlines, clips, anecdotes, polling, party messages, slogans, moral stories and the shorthand supplied by journalists and commentators.

This is not a sneer at the public. It is a description of how democracy works at scale. Nobody can carry the whole state in their head. We all live by compressed maps of reality, and most of those maps are drawn by others. The question is whether the map is good enough to stop us walking into a swamp.

Camus brings in a third warning: the danger of abstraction detached from human reality. He is not needed here as literary decoration. The useful point is narrower. Political abstraction becomes dangerous when people stop seeing the specific human beings, institutions and consequences behind the words. Humanity, justice, liberation, progress, equality, security, renewal – these are not bad words. Some are necessary words. But when they float above the actual conditions of action, they can license an astonishing amount of evasion.

This is where the old fear about language meets the present condition. Orwell warns that political language can disguise reality. Lippmann warns that the public acts through simplified pictures rather than reality itself. Camus warns that abstraction can detach from human life and become morally self-justifying. Put together, they describe a political culture in which words do not merely fail to explain the world. They can become the world people act upon.

The modern twist is that the manipulation no longer needs to be organised in some sinister back room. That would almost be reassuring, because at least somebody would be in charge. Much of the degradation now appears systemic and instinctive. Politicians learn which phrases survive. Journalists learn which phrases make useful headlines. Commentators learn which moral signals satisfy their audience. Social media learns which fragments travel. Parties learn from all of it. The result is not a conspiracy but an ecology.

In that ecology, platitudes are perfectly adapted organisms. They are short, portable, morally legible and resistant to scrutiny because scrutiny makes the speaker sound pedantic, evasive or insufficiently committed. Ask how a wealth tax would be valued, appealed, enforced and protected against avoidance, and you are accused of defending the rich. Ask what 'public control' means in legal, financial and operational terms, and you are said to be making excuses for failure. Ask which part of Europe Britain is rejoining, on what terms and

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with what democratic mandate, and you are told you lack ambition. The questioner becomes the problem because the question breaks the spell.

Orwell, Lippmann and Camus were not worrying about style for the sake of style. Their shared concern, approached from different directions, was the connection between language, thought and action. When that connection weakens, politics does not simply become more annoying. It becomes less capable of seeing the world it claims to govern.

WHAT PLATITUDES DON'T SAY

The current Labour Party turmoil is useful because pressure strips language down to its working parts. When a governing party is calm, comfortable and ahead in the polls, it can wrap itself in the long vocabulary of purpose: mission, renewal, stability, responsibility, partnership, growth, fairness, security, reform. When it is frightened, the language becomes shorter. The party starts looking for a rescue word.

That word is usually 'change'.

Matthew Parris writes about 'change' as ritual language. It is the word politicians reach for when they want the emotional force of dissatisfaction without the burden of saying what, precisely, will be altered. It can mean a change of leader, tone, policy, generation, faction, economic model, media strategy, spending priority, relationship with business, relationship with Europe, or simply a change in the public's mood. Its usefulness lies in this ambiguity. It allows everyone in the room to hear what they want.

Change can be a serious word if it is attached to institutions, laws, budgets, incentives, personnel and sequence. But in political speech it often floats above those details. It becomes a solvent. It dissolves disappointment without yet replacing it with design. The party can say it understands the need for change before it has decided whether the change is ideological, administrative, fiscal, constitutional or merely cosmetic. The word does not answer the question. It postpones it.

The same pattern appears in discussion of Europe. 'Rejoin Europe', 'return to the heart of Europe', 'reset the relationship', 'restore seriousness' – the phrases are emotionally efficient because they gather together several grievances at once: Brexit exhaustion, economic weakness, diminished influence, cultural embarrassment and the sense that Britain has become less adult than it used to be. For many people, that emotional package is enough. The phrase provides direction and mood.

But Europe is not a mood. It is a set of institutions, treaties, markets, legal obligations, budget contributions, regulatory commitments, migration rules, political constraints and national electorates, not all of them waiting by the telephone for Britain to call. Which Europe is being rejoined? The Single Market? The Customs Union? The European Union itself? On what terms? With what mandate? After what referendum, election or parliamentary bargain? What happens if the price of return includes free movement, budget payments, regulatory alignment and limited influence over rules Britain once helped shape? Does it matter that Europe itself is weaker, more divided and economically less dynamic than the memory of Europe being invoked?

None of this means a closer European relationship is wrong. It may well be sensible in specific areas. Trade friction, security cooperation, research participation, youth mobility, energy interconnection and regulatory alignment are all legitimate subjects for policy discus-

sion. But the phrase 'rejoin Europe' does not settle any of them. It compresses nostalgia, economics and identity into a destination and then pretends the route has been mapped.

Tax language has the same habit, though it sounds harder and more practical. 'Wealth tax', 'equalise capital gains tax', 'land tax', 'make the rich pay' – these phrases give politics the false precision of arithmetic. Here is the problem: the state needs money. Here is the answer: take it from those who have more. It is morally legible, fiscally tempting and politically useful, especially for a party whose activists believe the country's difficulties are caused less by weak productivity and more by unfair distribution.

Some of the underlying questions are real. Britain's tax system is a mess of distortions, exemptions, incentives, cliff edges and inherited privileges. The treatment of income, capital, property and work deserves serious examination. There is nothing inherently unserious about asking whether wealth, land or capital gains should bear a different share of the burden. But a tax proposal becomes a platitude when the politics stops at naming the target.

A serious tax proposal has to survive contact with behaviour. Who is taxed? On what asset? At what valuation? How often? With what exemptions? How are appeals handled? What happens to illiquid assets? How fast does avoidance begin? What happens to investment, incorporation, migration, pension planning, business formation and asset sales? How durable is the revenue after the first round of behavioural response? How long does the system take to build? How much does it raise once the clever accountants, lawyers and relocation advisers have done their work?

These are not technical quibbles. They are the essential ingredients of the policy. Even the IMF, hardly a libertarian pamphleteer, now warns that Britain's long-term scope for further revenue increases is becoming limited unless the tax system itself is fundamentally reformed. That is a very different argument from shouting at rich people until the deficit improves.

'Public control' is another phrase that sounds satisfyingly solid. It suggests democratic command replacing market failure. In a country tired of sewage spills, rail disruption, high bills and baffling executive pay, the appeal is obvious. But public control of what? Ownership? Franchising? Price regulation? Service standards? Procurement rules? Investment decisions? Labour contracts? Capital allocation? Risk? The phrase is allowed to do too much work.

Andy Burnham's Greater Manchester bus model is useful because it is often presented as a simple case for bringing services under public control. But the Bee Network is not straightforward public ownership in the old nationalisation sense. It is a franchising model in which public authorities set routes, fares and standards while private operators run services under contract. That distinction matters. It may be a good model. It may even be a much better model than the deregulated mess that preceded it. But if the lesson drawn is merely 'public control works', the mechanism has already been blurred.

The reality test is less exciting than the slogan. Who owns the assets? Who employs the staff? Who carries the financial risk? Who funds the capital investment? Who sets fares? Who absorbs losses? Who handles disputes? Who has the expertise to manage the contracts? What happens when public expectations exceed budgetary reality? The phrase 'public control' sounds like power returning to the people. The mechanism may be a set of contracts, subsidies, regulators, operators, performance targets and legal disputes. Less stirring, admittedly. Also more likely to be true.

Rachel Reeves's phrase 'price gouging' belongs to a slightly different category. It is not a

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policy destination; it is a moral enemy phrase. It turns the pain of high prices into a story of villains and victims. People are struggling because somebody, somewhere, is exploiting them. The phrase carries force because it is sometimes true. Companies can exploit market power. Scarcity can be abused. Consumers can be trapped. Regulators can be weak.

But food prices, energy bills and rents are shaped by margins, input costs, wage costs, supply chains, global commodity prices, exchange rates, financing costs, regulation, competition, planning, taxes, transport, storage, weather, war and consumer behaviour. Some price rises reflect opportunism. Some reflect scarcity. Some reflect previous policy failure. Some reflect the awkward fact that Britain imports too much, builds too little, stores too little and produces too expensively.

Calling it 'price gouging' gives politics a villain, but not necessarily a solution. What follows? Price caps? Windfall taxes? Competition inquiries? Margin controls? Naming and shaming? Subsidies? More regulation? More domestic production? Each answer creates its own consequences. Price caps can suppress supply. Taxes can reduce investment. Investigations can discover that margins are lower than the rhetoric implied. Subsidies can hide costs rather than remove them. Regulation can work, but only if the problem is actually regulatory failure.

This is the recurring pattern. A phrase becomes popular because it feels complete. In each case, the phrase points towards something real. That is why it works. Empty nonsense rarely survives for long. The dangerous platitude is more cunning. It attaches itself to a genuine problem and then offers the emotional outline of a solution. In government, the detail is the policy.

WHY EASY WORDS PROSPER

The examples in the previous section are not aberrations. They belong to a wider environment in which easy words prosper because they solve short-term problems for almost everyone involved.

Platitudes make politics easier for politicians because they reduce the number of things that must be admitted. The phrase buys room. It gives the appearance of seriousness without requiring the full disclosure of cost, conflict or sequence. This is not always cynical. Some politicians know the phrase is thin. The more worrying case is when repetition makes it feel like thought. By the time a phrase has passed through speeches, polling memos, briefing notes and interviews, its emptiness can disappear from view.

Platitudes also make politics easier for the public. That is the uncomfortable part, though it should not be overstated. The point is not that voters are stupid. Most people are busy, tired, overloaded and forced to use shortcuts. They have jobs, families, mortgages, elderly parents, bills, bad backs and perhaps one hour at night when they would rather not spend it reading an OBR annex.

Serious policy analysis is expensive in time and attention. Platitudes are cheap. They convert hard problems into moral directions – fairer, stronger, greener, safer, more controlled – while leaving the machinery of action for later, if later ever comes.

This is not a peculiarity of politics. It is how human beings cope with complexity. We do not examine every claim from first principles. We simplify, sort, recognise patterns, trust familiar cues and look for meanings that fit what we already think we know. Most of the time

this is not stupidity; it is efficiency. The problem is that politics has learned to feed those shortcuts with phrases that feel like understanding.

Confirmation bias makes us more receptive to phrases that fit what we already believe. Recency bias gives extra weight to the latest scandal, graph, price rise, migrant boat, strike, market wobble or viral clip. Fluency bias makes a smoothly expressed claim feel truer than an awkward but more accurate one. The confidence heuristic makes the speaker who sounds certain appear more competent than the one who admits difficulty. Availability bias makes vivid examples feel representative. Tribal bias tells us which phrases belong to our side before we have tested whether they explain anything.

Modern life makes this worse. The public is not merely inattentive; it is saturated. Every person with a phone now lives inside a permanent contest for attention. Politics competes with work messages, family dramas, health anxieties, football scores, weather warnings, investment apps, WhatsApp rows, streaming platforms, online shopping, celebrity idiocy and the slow psychological corrosion caused by reading the news too often. Under those conditions, political language has to survive brutal compression. It must be short enough to remember, emotional enough to share and vague enough to gather people who would start disagreeing if the details were revealed.

This habit is not confined to party politics. The wider public language has also become saturated with large, morally legible, low-mechanism statements. Institutions now speak in a voice of elevated intention. Businesses announce commitments to sustainability, inclusion, purpose and responsible leadership. Universities promise belonging, safety, excellence and equity. Charities speak of dignity, empowerment and lived experience. International bodies invoke solidarity, justice, resilience and the common good. None of these words is automatically empty. Many name real concerns. But the style of public seriousness has shifted towards abstraction.

The pronouncements of a member of the UK's royalty and the Pope show how widespread this vagueness has become. Prince Harry's public language often contains a real argument about media conduct, digital behaviour, silence, outrage, responsibility and truth. Yet it is frequently wrapped in broad abstract vocabulary about humanity, division, compassion, nuance and healing. There is substance, but it arrives under a duvet of moral uplift. The Pope's recent writing on AI is more substantial. It identifies real concerns about truth, work, digital platforms, war and the human consequences of technology. But it too often moves through high-minded abstractions: dignity, common good, solidarity, integral human development, the civilisation of love.

These are platitudes with better manners: elevated, decent, morally serious and still reluctant to explain the complexity of turning good intentions into deeds.

The point is not to sneer at moral language. A politics or public culture that cannot speak of justice, dignity, compassion or solidarity would be a cold and miserable thing. The problem comes when moral language becomes a substitute for agency. Who must act? With what authority? At what cost? Against which incentives? Under what law? Using which institution? How will success be measured? What happens when the policy hurts people who were meant to benefit? The better-mannered platitude avoids these questions not by sounding crude, but by sounding too noble to interrupt.

This is why political platitudes no longer sound unusually evasive. Much of institutional life now speaks the same way. Public discourse has trained people to accept sentences that

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sound serious while leaving action unclear. The politician who promises a fairer, greener, safer, more inclusive future is not speaking an alien dialect. He is speaking the shared language of strategy documents, NGO campaigns, corporate purpose statements, university mission pages, international summits and think-tank reports. It is fluent, respectable and almost impossible to falsify.

The media then gives this language its public test – or fails to. It needs conflict that can be packaged: a phrase that can be clipped, headlined, debated and placed into a recognisable drama. Social media completes the process of simplification. A complex policy argument becomes a phrase. The phrase becomes a clip, a headline or a chant. In its final form, it becomes the banner held up by the activist at a political rally: clear enough to signal a side, simple enough to repeat, and stripped of almost everything that would explain how the promise could be made real.

That is why easy words prosper. They fit the modern communications system because they are portable, moral and incomplete. They help politicians avoid premature conflict, help the public process politics quickly, help the media package disagreement, and help social media turn complexity into fragments. The language that travels furthest is rarely the language that explains most.

WHEN THE FILTER BECOMES A CONDUIT

Politicians produce the phrases, but the media decides whether those phrases are tested before they become public meaning. That is why this essay is primarily about the media, even though most of its examples come from politics. The crucial question is not only why politicians speak this way, but why the language is so often allowed to travel without being forced back towards mechanism.

The media's job is to slow political language down before it hardens into public understanding. It should ask what is being claimed, what would make it true, what evidence supports it, what trade-offs are being hidden, and what would happen if the promise were actually attempted. If those questions are not asked, journalism stops being a filter and becomes a delivery system.

There are still examples of the filter working. Tom McTague's writing on the Labour Party's condition is useful not because it supplies a slogan of its own, but because it widens the frame beyond Westminster intrigue. He moves from leadership gossip to the harder reality around it: Ukraine, Iran, AI, defence, building costs, borrowing costs, industrial energy prices, weak growth and youth detachment. That is what serious journalism should do. It prevents politics becoming a closed drama about personalities and asks whether the governing analysis is equal to the world outside the studio.

The Rest Is Politics interview with Zack Polanski showed the same discipline in long-form media. Rory Stewart and Alastair Campbell did not let large Green claims pass merely because they came wrapped in moral enthusiasm. They pressed Polanski to explain his understanding of debt, deficit, legislation, market reaction, capital flight and implementation. The result was uncomfortable, but useful. It soon became clear that Mr Polanski's economics were better suited to a rally than to the Treasury.

Long-form media can do this better than legacy broadcast formats because it has time. A three-minute interview often rewards evasion. A forty-minute conversation can expose it.

The guest has room to explain, but also less room to hide behind the first sentence. The interviewer can follow the claim down into the machinery. If there is a policy underneath, it should become clearer. If there is not, the air begins to leak out.

But the filter is not a permanent institutional quality. It is a discipline, and discipline can appear in one conversation and vanish in the next. The same commentators who press one guest for numbers and mechanism can drift into moral shorthand when the subject flatters their assumptions. That is why the Trump corruption discussion on *The Rest Is Politics* is useful as a contrast.

The problem was not that Trump deserved no scrutiny. Of course he did. The problem was the speed with which evidence, inference, analogy and moral verdict blurred into one another once the object of criticism was already disliked. I have addressed that more fully in *The Confirmation Loop*, so there is no need to reopen the whole case here. The point is simpler: even intelligent commentary can become a conduit when it stops testing the language its own audience wants to hear.

The media's failure is not always crude bias. Sometimes it is selective scepticism. Journalists and commentators can be forensic in one direction and strangely trusting in another. They demand mechanism from opponents while accepting mood from allies. They recognise a slogan when it belongs to the other tribe and call it a vision when it belongs to their own.

Legacy media has familiar weaknesses. It is still too drawn to personality, faction and performance. Who is up? Who is wounded? Who is briefing? Who can lead? Who made the mistake? Who is on manoeuvres? These questions are not irrelevant. Power is exercised by people, and parties matter. But when personality comes first, policy becomes a prop. The leadership contest becomes a drama of character, tone and positioning before it becomes a test of governing capacity. The question 'who can save the party?' crowds out the more useful question: save it to do what?

There is also drama overload. Political journalism must keep producing copy, panels, podcasts, newsletters, clips and live updates. Minor briefings become 'moments'. Hesitations become crises. A phrase dropped into an interview becomes evidence of a new direction. A backbench grumble becomes a rebellion. In that environment, platitudes are useful because they are easy to package.

Heterodox media arose partly because of this failure. Podcasts, Substacks, YouTube channels and independent newsletters are not just technological novelties. They are trust signals. They show that many people no longer believe the old filters are testing reality on their behalf. They suspect that legacy media has become too narrow, too socially uniform, too aligned with institutional opinion and too willing to convert approved language into apparent seriousness.

There is truth in that suspicion. But the rise of alternative media is evidence of failure in the old filtering system, not proof that the new system is necessarily better. Heterodox media has its own temptations: audience capture, grievance repetition, overcorrection, sympathetic platforming, tribal certainty and the exhilarating feeling that every establishment failure proves the entire counter-narrative. It can test what the old media ignores. It can also become a better-produced version of the same confirmation loop.

New media has more time, but time cuts both ways. A long interview can expose the machinery of a claim. It can also give an evasive guest more space to sound reasonable. A long podcast can interrogate a policy. It can also create an atmosphere of intimacy in which

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host and guest agree so comfortably that the listener mistakes ease for insight. A Substack can challenge lazy consensus. It can also serve an audience a weekly ration of its own cleverness. The format does not guarantee seriousness. Only the discipline does.

That is the test that matters. Does the medium force political language back towards mechanism, evidence and proportion? Or does it help the phrase travel faster?

The media does not merely transmit phrases. It changes their status. A politician's line begins as a tactical utterance. Repeated through headlines, clips, interviews and commentary, it starts to look like a political fact. Once commentators debate whether a party should adopt the phrase, the underlying mechanism may already have been smuggled past the checkpoint. The language has entered the realm of serious politics before anyone has checked whether it contains a workable policy.

This is where the filter becomes a conduit. The media may think it is analysing politics when it is really circulating political language in a more polished form. A minister says something vague. A journalist turns it into a headline. A panel discusses the reaction. A podcast explores whether the phrase will land. Social media cuts the best sentence into a clip. Activists turn it into a chant. By then, the original absence of mechanism has become almost irrelevant. The phrase has momentum.

That is why platitudes are not only a political problem. They are a media problem. Politicians supply language without mechanism, but media decides whether that language is interrogated, amplified, moralised, ridiculed, clipped, normalised or converted into apparent seriousness. When the filter works, politics is forced back towards reality. When it becomes a conduit, emotionally satisfying language travels faster than thought.

THE COST OF EMPTY LANGUAGE

Empty language has two costs. The first is practical: phrase-shaped politics fails when it meets reality-shaped problems. The second is cumulative: each failure teaches the public to trust the next promise less.

Britain's problems are not mysterious. They have been listed so often that the list itself has become part of the national wallpaper: weak growth, poor productivity, high taxes, fiscal pressure, rising welfare demand, health-related inactivity, housing failure, expensive energy, strained public services, immigration and asylum pressure, youth insecurity and institutional incapacity. None of this is secret; I am sure you can recite them by heart.

Politicians keep pitching fluffy verbal remedies at these material problems that require money (lots of it), authority, sequencing, administrative competence, and time. The public knows this, though not always in the language of economists, officials or think-tank reports. Nationally, people worry about the economy, immigration, the NHS, crime, housing and the cost of living. Locally, decline is encountered in more practical forms: potholes, GP appointments, empty shops, unreliable transport, unaffordable rents, delayed repairs and public services that seem to require endless chasing.

Against this, politicians speak as if the relationship between slogan and solution is self-evident. The phrase points to a concern and is then treated as if it has already begun to be solved. It is said with sincerity because they, the political class, actually believe that's how it works.

This is where political language most often deceives itself. It treats failure as a problem of

presentation when it is really a problem of conversion. The country is not short of announcements, missions, resets, reviews or leaders promising to 'cut through'. It is short of the capacity to turn intention into durable action.

Tony Blair's recent intervention matters here not because he has all the answers, but because he understands the word 'efficacy'. The question is not whether a government sounds virtuous, compassionate, ambitious or modern. The question is whether it can get big things done. Tom McTague's warnings point in the same direction. The world pressing against Britain is not waiting politely while Westminster rearranges its leadership anxieties. Ukraine, Iran, AI, defence, borrowing costs, building costs, industrial energy prices, weak growth and youth detachment are not messaging problems.

That is the practical cost of empty language. It persuades politics that sounding serious is a first step towards governing seriously. Sometimes it is. More often, it is a way of postponing the moment when somebody has to move money, law, institutions and people. Britain has less room than it once had for that postponement. The gap between phrase and policy is therefore no longer just annoying. It is dangerous.

The second cost is trust. Platitude-politics repeats the same cycle: promise, phrase, media drama, disappointment, explanation, new phrase. Each cycle teaches the public to discount the next one.

Voters do not need to understand every mechanism to notice the pattern. They do not need to read the Treasury model, inspect the planning rules or follow the gilt market. They can tell when words and outcomes no longer belong to the same world. That instinct may be imprecise, but it is not irrational.

That is why the Edelman UK Trust numbers matter. Trust in government sits at 36%. Trust in media is barely higher, at 39%. Only 16% think the next generation will be better off. The exact numbers should not be overworked, but the direction matters. Government and media are the two institutions at the centre of the loop. Politicians supply the phrases. Media gives them reach, drama and apparent importance. The public receives the performance and then lives with the gap.

The next-generation pessimism matters because renewal language lands differently in a country expecting decline. A promise of national transformation may sound stirring inside a conference hall, but to a public expecting their children to be worse off, it arrives pre-discounted. The public has heard too many versions of the same music.

That is why 'Broken Britain' is such a revealing phrase. It sounds like a diagnosis while avoiding one. Broken how? By whom? Through which failures? Fiscal, administrative, social, institutional, cultural, economic? The phrase gathers potholes, NHS queues, housing failure, stagnant wages, immigration pressure, stagnant growth, high taxes, public disorder and collapsing trust into one gloomy shrug. It explains almost nothing, but it feels true because so much now appears not to work.

In that sense, platitude-politics ends by naming the condition it helped produce. First, complex problems are reduced to phrases. Then those phrases are mistaken for policies. Then the policies fail because the machinery was never properly understood. Finally, the failure itself is given another phrase – 'Broken Britain' – and the cycle begins again.

The media and politicians sit at the centre of this cycle, but the bill is paid by the public. Not only in taxes, bills, waiting lists and poor services, though those are real enough. It is paid in lowered expectations. People learn to expect less from politics while being asked to

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believe more at each election. A democracy can survive disappointment. It struggles when disappointment becomes the expected result of every promise.

This is why platitudes are not trivial. They break the line between language, thought and government. They allow politics to simulate seriousness while avoiding the work seriousness requires. They make media conflict easier, public understanding thinner and policy failure more likely. They do not cause every national weakness. That would be too neat, and therefore suspicious. But they help explain why so much political language now seems to pass across the surface of the country's problems without gripping them.

The plague endures because it suits both sides of the bargain: politicians get language without mechanism, the media gets drama without depth, and the country gets another performance in place of government.