

He [the student of politics] must also be on his guard against the old words, for the words persist when the reality that lay behind them has changed. It is inherent in our intellectual activity that we seek to imprison reality in our description of it. Soon, long before we realize it, it is we who become the prisoners of the description. From that point on, our ideas degenerate into a kind of folklore which we pass to each other, fondly thinking we are still talking of the reality around us.

Thus we talk of free enterprise, of capitalist society, of the rights of free association, of parliamentary government, as though all of these words stand for the same things they formerly did. Social institutions are what they do, not necessarily what we say they do. It is the verb that matters, not the noun.

If this is not understood, we become symbol worshippers. The categories we once evolved and which were the tools we used in our intercourse with reality become hopelessly blunted. In these circumstances the social and political realities we are supposed to be grappling with change and reshape themselves independently of the collective impact of our ideas. We become the creature and no longer the partner of social realities. As we fumble with outworn categories our political vitality is sucked away and we stumble from one situation to another, without chart, without compass, and with the steering wheel lashed to a course we are no longer following.

This is the real point of danger for a political party and for the leaders and thinkers who inspire it. For if they are out of touch with reality, the masses are not.

ANEURIN BEVAN, *In Place of Fear*

Source: 'Language in Thought and Action'  
by S.I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa  
(Harcourt).

## Prologue

### *The Story of A-Town and B-Ville: A Semantic Parable*

ONCE UPON A TIME, said the professor, there were two small communities, spiritually as well as geographically situated at a considerable distance from each other. They had, however, this problem in common: both were hard hit by a recession, so that in each of the towns there were about one hundred heads of families unemployed.

The leaders of A-town, the first community, were substantial and sound-thinking business people. The unemployed tried hard, as unemployed people usually do, to find jobs; but the situation did not improve. The city leaders had been brought up to believe that there is always enough work for everyone, if you only look for it hard enough. Comforting themselves with this doctrine, the leaders could have shrugged their shoulders and turned their backs on the problem, except for the fact that they were genuinely kindhearted. They could not bear to see the unemployed workers and families starving. In order to prevent hardship, they felt that they had to provide these people with some means of sustenance. Their principles told them, nevertheless, that if people were given something for nothing, it would demoralize their character. Naturally this made the city fathers even more unhappy, because they were faced with the horrible choice of (1) letting the unemployed starve, or (2) destroying their moral character.

The solution they finally hit upon, after much debate and soul-searching, was this. They decided to give the unemployed families "welfare payments" of five hundred dollars a month. (They considered using the English term "dole," but with their characteristic American penchant for euphemism, they decided on the less offensive term.) To make sure that the unemployed would not take their unearned payments too much for granted, however, they decided that the "welfare" was to be accompanied by a moral lesson, to wit: the obtaining of the assistance would be made so difficult, humiliating, and disagreeable that there would be no temptation for anyone to go through the process unless it was absolutely necessary; the moral disapproval of the community would be turned upon the recipients of the money at all times in such a way that they would try hard to get "off welfare" and "regain their self-respect." Some even proposed that people on welfare be denied the vote, so that the moral lesson would be



Words forming thought and vice versa

more deeply impressed upon them. Others suggested that their names be published at regular intervals in the newspapers. The city fathers had enough faith in the goodness of human nature to expect that the recipients would be grateful, since they were getting something for nothing, something for which they hadn't worked.

When the plan was put into operation, however, the recipients of the welfare checks proved to be an ungrateful, ugly bunch. They seemed to resent the cross-examinations and inspections at the hands of the "welfare investigators," who, they said, took advantage of a person's misery to snoop into every detail of private life. In spite of uplifting editorials in the A-town *Tribune* telling them how grateful they ought to be, the recipients of welfare refused to learn any moral lessons, declaring that they were "just as good as anybody else." When, for example, they permitted themselves the rare luxury of a movie, a six-pack of beer, or an evening of bingo, their neighbors looked at them sourly, as if to say, "I work hard and pay my taxes just in order to support loafers like you in idleness and pleasure." This attitude, which was fairly characteristic of those members of the community who still had jobs, further embittered the welfare recipients, so that they showed even less gratitude as time went on and were constantly on the lookout for insults, real or imaginary, from people who might think that they weren't as good as anybody else. A number of them took to moping all day long; one or two even committed suicide. Others, feeling that they had failed to provide, found it hard to look their families in the face. Children whose parents were "on welfare" felt inferior to classmates whose parents were not "public charges." Some of these children developed inferiority complexes that affected not only their grades at school, but their lives and self-concepts after they left school. Drug abuse and alcoholism increased. Finally, several welfare recipients felt they could stand their loss of self-respect no longer and decided, after many efforts to gain honest jobs, that they would earn money by their own efforts even if they had to rob. They did so and were caught and sent to the state penitentiary.

The recession, therefore, hit A-town very hard. The welfare policy had

averted starvation, no doubt, but suicide, personal quarrels, unhappy homes, the weakening of social organizations, the maladjustment of children, and finally, crime, had resulted. A culture in which recipients felt themselves unworthy, and felt little responsibility or control over their own lives, was created. The town was divided in two, the "haves" and the "have-nots," so that there was class hatred. People shook their heads sadly and declared that it all went to prove over again what they had known from the beginning, that giving people something for nothing inevitably demoralizes their characters. The citizens of A-town gloomily waited for prosperity to return, with less and less hope as time went on.

The story of the other community, B-ville, was entirely different. B-ville was a relatively isolated town, too far out of the way to be reached by Rotary Club speakers and other dispensers of conventional wisdom. One of the city commissioners, however, who was something of an economist, explained to the other commissioners that unemployment, like sickness, accident, fire, tornado, or death, hits unexpectedly in modern society, irrespective of the victim's merits or deserts. He went on to say that B-ville's homes, parks, streets, industries, and everything else B-ville was proud of, had been built by the work and taxes of these same people who were now unemployed. He then proposed to apply a principle of insurance: if the contribution these unemployed people had previously made to the community could be regarded as a form of "premium" paid to the community against a time of misfortune, payments now made to them to prevent their starvation could be regarded as "insurance claims." He therefore proposed that all persons of good repute who had worked in the community in some line of useful endeavor, whether as machinists, clerks, or bank managers, be regarded as "citizen policyholders," having "claims" against the city in the case of unemployment for five hundred dollars a month until such time as they might again be employed. Naturally, he had to talk very slowly and patiently, since the idea was entirely new to his fellow commissioners. But he described his plan as a "straight business proposition," and finally they were persuaded. They worked out in detail, to everyone's satisfaction, the conditions under which citizens should be regarded as policyholders in the city's social insurance plan, and decided to give checks for five hundred dollars a month to the heads of each of B-ville's indigent families.

B-ville's "claim adjusters," whose duty it was to investigate the claims of the citizen "policyholders," had a much better time than A-town's "welfare investigators." While the latter had been resentfully regarded as snoopers, the former, having no moral lesson to teach but simply a business transaction to carry out, treated their clients with businesslike courtesy and got the same amount of information as the welfare investigators had, with considerably less difficulty. There were no hard feelings.

It further happened, fortunately, that news of B-ville's plans reached a liberal newspaper editor in the big city at the other end of the state.



This writer described the plan in a leading feature story headed "B-VILLE LOOKS AHEAD. Adventure in Social Pioneering Launched by Upper Valley Community." As a result of this publicity, inquiries about the plan began to come to the city hall even before the first checks were mailed out. This led, naturally, to a considerable feeling of pride on the part of the commissioners, who, being boosters, felt that this was a wonderful opportunity to put B-ville on the map.

Accordingly, the commissioners decided that instead of simply mailing out the checks as they had originally intended, they would publicly present the first checks at a monster civic ceremony. They invited the governor, who was glad to come to bolster his none-too-enthusiastic support in that locality; the president of the state university; the state senator from their district; and other functionaries. They decorated the National Guard Armory with flags and got out the American Legion Fife and Drum Corps, the Boy Scouts, and other civic organizations.

At the big celebration, each family who was to receive a "social insurance check" was marched up to the platform to accept it, and the governor and the mayor shook hands with each of them as they came trooping up in their best clothes. Fine speeches were made; there was much cheering and shouting; pictures of the event showing the recipients of the checks shaking hands with the mayor, and the governor patting the heads of the children, were not only published in the local papers but broadcast on the evening news.

The recipients of these insurance checks, therefore, felt personally honored, that B-ville was a wonderful little town, and that they could face unemployment with greater courage and assurance since the community was so supportive of them. The men and women found themselves being kidded in a friendly way by their acquaintances for having been "up there with the big shots," shaking hands with the governor, and so on. The children at school found themselves envied for having been on television. All in all, B-ville's unemployed did not commit suicide, were not haunted by a sense of failure, did not turn to crime and drugs, did not manifest personal maladjustments, did not develop class hatred as the result of their five hundred dollars a month. . . .

At the conclusion of the professor's story, the discussion began:

"That just goes to show," said the Advertising Executive, who was known as a realistic thinker, "what good promotional work can do. B-ville's city council had real advertising sense, and that civic ceremony was a masterpiece. . . . made everyone happy . . . put over the scheme in a big way. Reminds me of the way we do things in our business: as soon as we called horse-mackerel 'tuna-fish,' we developed a big market for it. I suppose if you called welfare 'insurance,' you could actually get people to like it, couldn't you?"

"What do you mean, 'calling' it insurance?" asked the Social Worker. "B-ville's scheme wasn't welfare at all. It *was* insurance."

"Good grief! Do you realize what you're saying?" cried the Advertising Executive in surprise. "Are you implying that those people had any *right* to that money? All I said was that it's a good idea to *disguise* welfare as insurance if it's going to make people happier. But it's still welfare, no matter what you *call* it. It's all right to kid the public along to reduce discontent, but we don't need to kid ourselves as well!"

"But they *do* have a right to that money! They're not getting something for nothing. It's insurance. They did something for the community, and that's their prem—"

"Say, are you crazy?"

"Who's crazy?"

"You're crazy. Welfare is welfare, isn't it? If you'd only call things by their right names. . . ."

"But, confound it, insurance is insurance, isn't it?"

P.S. Those who have concluded that the point of the story is that the Social Worker and the Advertising Executive were "only arguing about different names for the same thing" are asked to reread the story and explain what they mean by (1) "only" and (2) "the same thing."