

THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

**LONGLISTED ENTRY:
CLIVE JAMES, BBC RADIO 4
A Point of View**

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I once knew a young man who tapped his fingers on the table while he spoke. He didn't tap them loudly. He just tapped them to accompany the rhythm of what he was saying, so that the general effect was more varied than monotonous. But it drove me crazy, and I went even crazier because I wasn't allowed to say that I was going crazy. In the polite Anglo-Saxon culture from which the Australian culture derives—and I want to examine this word “culture” in a minute -- you don't tell people who have the fidgets to stop fidgeting. This young man was in our house quite a lot, tapping away for a couple of years, and never once did I feel that I had the leeway to tell him to stop doing that or I would arrange to have him escorted outside and inserted upside down into the wheelie bin for compostable matter.

Then he married one of my daughters and I felt free to speak. I spoke gently, trying to leave room for the consideration that I might be unusually sensitive to the fidgets in other people, and might even have a case of the fidgets myself that I didn't know about. The possibility that there are deliberate cases of the fidgets is one that we will have to examine, but surely the fidgets in general are just a sign of nervous energy, and almost all young people fidget. My son-in-law has been exemplary since I finally felt

free to explain my point with the aid of a mallet, and lately he hasn't even needed to keep his hands in his pockets during a conversation.

But fidgeting is a bad sign in adults, and the mental version of the fidgets is practically a defining mark of the age we live in now, when the liberal democracies, as if they couldn't count on enough trouble from illiberal forces of all persuasions, nevertheless behave as if they had a duty to demoralise their own populations by changing the name of everything that people have learned to rely on. The excellent social commentator Christopher Booker once called this widespread official urge to change the name of everything that works Neophilia, but I think we need a new name, the Fidgets.

Thinking that anything needs a new name is, of course, an example of the fidgets, but in this case I think we need it because the word Neophilia suggested that the urge came from a mere love of the new, whereas I think it comes from something more comprehensive, a demonically playful urge to see how far people can be driven towards insanity before they protest. Not long ago, at Paddington, I ran to catch a train that was called First. The long version of the name is First Great Western, which is already bad enough because it suggests the possible existence of a Second Great Western. But the First Great Western company insists on referring to itself and its trains as just First.

My problem, as I ran with a heavy bag in each hand from the barrier end of the platform, was to find the first second class carriage in a train all of whose carriages were marked First. I cursed First in the worst language at my command, but my outburst at First was nothing beside the imprecations I rained on One. Yes, what used to be simply called Anglia Railways is now even more briefly, but far less simply, called One. This leaves the

way clear for the railway station announcer to inform potential passengers that one One train will leave from platform two and the other One train will leave from platform three.

If the first One train leaves at twenty to one it's the twenty to one One train and if the other one leaves at ten to one it's ten to one on that's it's the one One train one actually wanted but one couldn't understand the announcement. What happens when you have to change from a First train to a One train I leave to you, but you might face a situation where you should catch the first First train if you want to change to the one One train that will get you to the mental hospital before you crack up.

Except, of course, that it's never now called a train, it's called a service, just as the passenger is now a customer. Linguistic philosophers have already written theses about how the vocabulary of marketing has invaded the realm of transport, which logically should have no need of marketing, because people know exactly what they want and demand nothing except for the means of transport to be safe, clean and on time. But the language of marketing spreads inexorably because it gives those who use it a chance to be creative, which everybody has been taught is a desirable thing to be.

In fact, the last thing that a passenger who has already been outraged by being called a customer wants to hear when he is sitting, or probably standing, in a train running late, or probably not running at all, is a voice on the public address system calling the train a service, when providing a service is exactly what it is currently in the process of not doing. Nor does the voice on the public address system show any sign, once it gets started, of wanting to shut up. The voice supplies the information that the buffet car is situated in the middle of the service, for the benefit of anyone who thought that it might be travelling along separately

some way behind the service. The voice apologises for the delay caused to your journey, a way of softening the fact that the delay had been caused, not to your journey, but to you.

The voice continues to audition for a career in broadcasting by pointing out that the first One service to arrive at the next station will be the last One service to continue any further until the engineering works have been completed. Where did all this start? Well, it probably started when the name British Railways contracted to British Rail.

Contraction of a system's name is a bad sign and rearrangement of the name's components is another. It's a rule that this rearrangement of the name's verbal components should only take place at a time when the system's mechanical components are melting down. London Transport, for example, changed to Transport for London in the very period when the Jubilee line extension was in a continual process of coming to a halt because its hyper-sophisticated signalling system was doing what state of the art technology always does, i.e. proving that the technology you want is the stuff that used to work. The total cost of changing a logo for an organization that big is so frightening that the figure is seldom published.

Sometimes the total cost happens twice. History has forgotten the brief period when the name Royal Mail, which everyone understood, was changed to Consignia, which nobody understood. The cost of changing the name on every facility and product of the Royal Mail to Consignia was astronomical, and the cost of changing the name back again was astronomical twice. A country that could do that to itself was ready to construct the Millennium Dome, a monument to the fidgets said to be visible from the moon, an attribute valued by the kind of people who think they have already been there.

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Millennium Dome is that it still has its “the”. The unwanted, unwarranted and unwieldy suppression of a preliminary “the” is a sure sign of the fidgets at executive level. The Tate gallery, for example, in either of its manifestations, Tate Britain or Tate Modern, is now officially not the Tate, but Tate. This leaves the way open to meet at eight at Tate to eat, in which case we ate at Tate, or we were late at Tate and had to wait, and thus missed our Tate at eight tete a tete.

Such changes of name were once made by freshly appointed executives who wanted to announce their arrival, and who, unable to change what they should, changed what they could. But by now, surely, it’s done out of a kind of desperation, as if words could work magic. It happens throughout the culture, and the misguided use of the word “culture” is a disturbing further development of what is essentially voodoo. Regularly now, we hear about young men shooting each other and sometimes shooting their own girlfriends as a response to what they call “disrespect”. The misuse of the word “disrespect” is just a pitiful sign of the vicious stupidity by which young men demand to be respected when there is nothing to respect them for. But when the upmarket newspapers run worried articles about what they call “the gun culture”, that is something else. Calling it “the gun culture” not only solves nothing, it actually compounds the offence, by tacitly conceding that the responsible authorities can’t be expected to confiscate the lethal weapons from the individual boneheads waving them, but should wait until a complex sociological phenomenon has been explained in the appropriately elevated words. But you can’t blame the responsible authorities for waiting: actually to do something about a young crackhead fidgeting with a gun takes more than high flown language - it takes bravery, but that’s another subject.

