

CONNECT

Truth Is Bad - Lies Are Good

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1 We all live in a strange world - and that world seems to be coming even more strange by the day. For example, we now learn that deceit and lies are allowed in Parliament. Indeed, not only are they allowed, they are - in effect - encouraged.

2 The rules of the House of Commons forbid a Member of Parliament from accusing another MP of deceiving the House or the public, even if it is perfectly clear that they have misrepresented the truth.

3 To say in Parliament that someone has deliberately been deceitful – regardless of whether it is true, justified or evidenced - is “unparliamentary language.”

4 The inevitable happened recently. Dawn Butler, a Labour MP, challenged the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, saying:

“The prime minister has lied to this house time and time again.”

The Dep. Speaker asked her to reflect on what she had said, which she did, saying:

“I’ve reflected on my words, and somebody needs to tell the truth in this house, that the prime minister has lied.”

5 Although an error has been claimed, rather than a deliberate attempt to deceive, Boris Johnson has never corrected himself, and fellow ministers have refused to accept that he was wrong.

6 Johnson has often been accused of having a tendency towards dishonesty, even by his editor at the Daily Telegraph, who referred to the PM’s “moral bankruptcy, rooted in a contempt for truth”.

7 Under his tenure as prime minister, Downing Street has often declined to correct the record when he has said something false, even on issues that are not in doubt.

8 But, in Parliament, accusations of dishonesty are forbidden. This Parliamentary rule, which punishes nobody who gives out misinformation, but punishes anyone who calls out misinformation, seems designed for the so-called “post-truth era.”

9 So, what is the post-truth era? Wikipedia’s definition is “the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth” and the “circuitous slippage between facts or alternative facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth”.

10 An interesting example of an absence of “shared objective standards for truth” features in George Orwell’s novel “1984”. To summarise the scene:

"How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?"

"Four."

"And if the Party says that it is not four but five – then how many?"

"Four."

O'Brien, who is asking the questions, proceeds to inflict agonising pain upon Winston. Winston resists, as long as he can, changing his answer but he does change it, from four to five.

O'Brien responds by saying that Winston's new answer is not good enough, because Winston is lying. The scene continues with Winston saying:

"How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four."

11 What happens now in real life when, as in this fictional scene, objective standards for truth are not shared by all the parties? Does there exist, in such circumstances, different versions of the truth? If so, do all versions of the truth have equal validity? If not, how is "the truth" decided, and by whom?

12 The above-described scene from "1984" – and indeed the entire novel – explores these questions, among others. Winston and others who have a different TRUTH from O'Brien and the Party are able to hold that TRUTH inside their own minds, as long as they do not communicate it to anyone else, although even holding beliefs – to oneself - is dangerous.

Ultimately, however, O'Brien and the Party have the final say on what the TRUTH is, because they have the ability to control other people. Control over the population – and particularly their beliefs - is worrying in the extreme!

13 When Dawn Butler stuck to her guns, refusing to give up her TRUTH, she was ejected from the House of Commons - suspended for the rest of the day. She commented:
"It's funny that we get in trouble in this place for calling out the lie, rather than the person lying."

14 Surely it is beyond time, that lying in public office – including in such places as parliament – is regarded as a criminal offence and dealt with in the most severe of terms – by the courts – for the people.

15 A person some years ago made a very interesting observation I thought. They remarked – something like;
Per head of population – there were more criminal convictions among the 650 serving MPs in parliament, than there were compared to the country as a whole.

What a stunning reality that sounds – and must be easily confirmed by official record.

16 CONNECT published last week an article, titled "Is It Really True?" The article introduced the concept of Truth Coefficients being attached to articles and importantly to sources of articles and information generally. Given the path described in the 1984 novel – not such a fictional now perhaps - which society seems to be falling towards, perhaps the idea of assessing TRUTH for reliability with an assigned Truth Coefficient is not a bad idea.