

Republican Perspective

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by John Littig

Newspeak---the sequel

My column “Newspeak” was published on May 4. If you read that column, you’ll recall that Newspeak was the official government language of George Orwell’s “1984.” I cited two dictionary definitions of Newspeak: “speech or writing that uses words in a way that changes their meaning especially to persuade people to think a certain way” and “an official or semi-official style of writing or saying one thing in the guise of its opposite, especially in order to serve an ideological cause while pretending to be objective...”

Right on cue (but I do not take credit for this) Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason inadvertently provided another Newspeak example in her May 4 Washington Post guest editorial. I found this coincidence irresistible, so here it is.

Mason heads up DOJ’s Office of Justice Programs. In her editorial, she announced that her Office will no longer refer to those released from prison as “felons” or “convicts.” The replacement labels will be “person who committed a crime” or “individual who was incarcerated.” The new terminology will be used in “speeches, solicitations, website content, and social media posts.”

Mason explained that the reason for the change is to reduce stigmatization. She also wrote “The labels we affix to those who have served time can drain their sense of self-worth and perpetuate a cycle of crime, the very thing re-entry programs are designed to prevent.”

But Mason’s May 4 announcement was not original. In 2013, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter issued an executive order requiring city employees to replace “ex-offender” with “returning citizen.”

Nutter’s edict goes well beyond Mason’s effort to destigmatize with less harsh language. In fact, Nutter’s “returning citizen” should be hailed as an obfuscatory triumph.

“Returning citizen” gives no hint that the person committed a crime or served prison time. In fact, it is so meaningless that the described person may even be returning from some admirable endeavor such as an LDS mission or serving in the military. On the other hand, he might be returning from something rather less praiseworthy, such as a trip to the men’s room.

Perfect Newspeak