
A DOUBTER'S DICTIONARY

John Ralston Saul, the Canadian novelist and essayist, would probably have felt more at home in the 18th century, a century he visited in Voltaire's Bastards (1992). But he would likely have steered the Enlightenment toward a somewhat different conclusion. The Age of Reason, in Saul's view, has brought too much certainty to today's world, from politicians who think themselves the panacea for the world's ills to a populace mesmerized by the authority of "experts." As he suggested in that earlier book, "we must alter our civilization from one of answers to one which feels satisfaction, not anxiety, when doubt is established." Consider these selections from Saul's forthcoming lexicon as a helpful injection of incertitude into our daily lives.

BY JOHN RALSTON SAUL

A BIG MAC. The communion wafer of consumption. Not really food but the promise of food. Whatever it tastes like, whatever it is made of, once it touches lips A Big Mac is transubstantiated into the mythological hamburger.

It is, with Perrier, one of the sacred objects of the leading philosophical school of the late 20th century—public relations. Cynics often unjustly suggest that this school favors superficial appearances over content.

Had this been the case, PR would have failed. Most people, after all, can easily recognize the difference between appearances and reality.

A Big Mac, for example, is not big. It doesn't taste of much. It isn't good for you. And it seems sweet. Why does it seem sweet if, as the company says, it isn't laced with sugar?

What the philosophy of PR proposes is theoretical content (such as sex appeal, fun, individualism, sophistication, the rejection of sophistication) in the place of actual content (banal carbonated water and a mediocre hamburger). This is modern metaphysics.

Because public relations is built on illusion, it tends to eliminate choice. This is an important characteristic of contemporary capitalism. A Big Mac, like so many creations of PR, is a symbol of passive conformity. As Mac McDonald put it: "If you gave people a choice, there would be chaos."

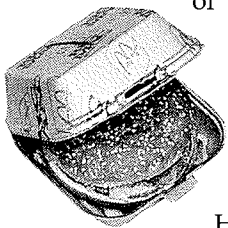
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH. The triumph of banality over ego.

AIR CONDITIONING. An efficient and widely used method for spreading disease.

One of the keys to the revolution in architecture and planning that struck Western cities after World War II was the gradual realization that systems of forced air could heat and cool large numbers of people in a cost-effective manner.

This removed one of the major restrictions on the size of buildings. If windows needn't be opened, then neither density nor height had to be limited. Once heated or cooled, the air could be endlessly recycled through buildings.

But people began to notice that working in large office towers was far more draining than in



buildings where windows could be opened. Then a dramatic incident focused attention. A group of old American veterans staying in a hotel to attend a convention began to die, as if struck by a plague. It was explained that Legionnaire's disease was the result not of recycled air but of defective recycling.

There were more common experiences which weren't fatal. Sometimes people merely caught a cold; increasingly it was a virulent strain of what was called the flu. But these flus could bring on vomiting, dangerous temperatures, and exhaustion. They often killed the elderly or fragile. In fact, they seemed to come in international waves that changed character each season. Every few months there would be a mutation in the type of virulency. Planes made these flu strains instantly international. And the office towers then spread them around in each city.

Modern hospitals were also being built with these airflow systems and it soon became common knowledge that hospitals were places in which you caught things. The hard-learned medical lessons of physical isolation clarified in the 19th and early 20th centuries seemed to have been forgotten.

Much of modern medicine is based upon controlling diseases by controlling movements. Now there were new and unexpected waves of viral diseases, small epidemics, in fact. One year it would be viral pneumonia. The next there would be a line of executives struck by ill-defined symptoms that exhausted them, sometimes for several years.

Air conditioning also became a clear example of the inflexibility of modern industry and of technocratic structures generally. Economics seems to be painfully linear. Every hour of work lost to a company through sickness is also money lost. It is common during the winter in places with moderate climates to find that 20 to 30 percent of office workers are home sick. There seems to be no room for applied thought that uses practical observation in order to re-evaluate earlier policies.

Corporations inquiring whether windows can be made to open in office towers are told by architects and the construction industry that this is impossible, or is possible only for a significant extra charge, plus long-term air-management costs. In spite of thousands of books about management and competitiveness, many of which talk about getting the most out of executives and other employees through leadership, training, and encouragement of individual talents, there seems to be no calculus for integrating the costs of sick leave into those of air conditioning.

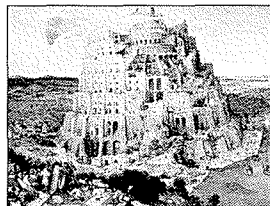
In truth, the air-conditioning system is rarely mentioned by companies when they build, buy, or rent office space. Nothing prevents them from demanding air-conditioning systems limited to small areas—less than a floor—and that constantly take in and expel air. Nothing, that is, except the inability of our system to integrate widely recognized medical costs with those of engineering.

ANGLO-SAXONS. A racial group composed mainly of Celts, Germans, Italians, Chinese, Ukrainians, French, and other peoples who have been conquered by or immigrated to the English-speaking world. To blame for everything.

BABEL, TOWER OF. Multilingualism remains the source of movement and growth in a civilization.

The ability to fill the house of reality, intellect, and imagination with different furniture is a great pleasure and a great strength. The strengths of comparison and of contradiction. The ability to draw on the originality or strengths of one to enrich another.

But for this to happen, writers and intellectuals must play their role, carrying words, images, emotions, and ideas back and forth between languages. Unilingualism is one result of the



acceptance by writers of professionalism. As they embrace the related idea that creativity is a sufficient justification for writing, so many become lost in the worship of a single tongue. The only status worse than this involves seeing themselves as the professional voice of a culture or a nation.

The laziest intellectuals have been produced by the four or five dominant cultures of the West. They claim that it is hard to write well if you speak more than one language, a problem that Dante, Voltaire, and Tolstoy do not seem to have encountered. More recently they have taken to complaining that a similar unilingual sectarianism has sprung up among smaller linguistic groups who feel threatened. At both levels the writers are guilty of betraying their obligation to communicate.

Today more senior bureaucrats and business executives are multilingual than writers. The corporatist elites are therefore inheriting by default the right to decide what will be in the language of our international agendas, whether they deal with politics, business, or culture.

BAD PEOPLE. In public life bad people, like bad money, drive out good. Only a constant effort by the citizenry to favor service over ambition and, in policy, balanced complexity over manipulative simplicity, can draw the good forward.

It is far easier to gain and hold power for those who seek only power. Self-interest is not constrained by the distracting difficulties of trying to serve the public good. Unless society has a respect for public service so strong that it amounts to an unwritten obligation, a large number among those who present themselves will be the unreasonably ambitious and the emotionally damaged seeking to work out their inferiority complexes and other problems in public.

This difficulty has always been with us. In his definition of fatherland, Voltaire complained that "he who burns with ambition to become aedile, tribune, praetor, consul, dictator, cries out that he loves his country and he loves only himself." Yeats returned to the subject in "The Second Coming": "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." What is this lack of conviction?

Relatively well-balanced, disinterested people make an important private sacrifice by giving time to the general good. They also have trouble believing that their contribution could be important. This is not false modesty. The energy of political ambition is like a tornado that clears out those who don't have it. The particular problem of our courtier-ridden society is that its standards are those of pure power and of money.

In 1993, the departing director of the French secret service, Claude Silberzahn, laid out for his agents their principal areas of work. The first was the rise of ethnic intolerance. The second was the "extraordinary and frenetic quest for money in all its forms . . . by the political and economic elites, as if money had no smell . . . when often it is dirty, doubtful, and illicit." This atmosphere repulses most people.

More balanced citizens may have strong convictions about the public weal and public service. But they are less likely to be obsessed by the exercising of power. *The Federalist*, in arguing for the new American constitution, argued for checks and balances that would neutralize the power of factions and so draw the best citizens out into the public process. But the ultimate checks and balances are not constitutional. They are the approval and disapproval of the citizen. So long as we reward raw ambition and the skillful manipulation of power, we will continue to draw those whose interest is self-interest.

John Ralston Saul has written several novels, including The Birds of Prey (1977) and The Paradise Eater (1990), as well as the critical study, Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West (1992). These selections are excerpted from the forthcoming book, The Doubter's Companion: A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense, to be published in October by The Free Press. Copyright © 1994 by John Ralston Saul.

CALM. A state of emotion that is overrated except in religious retreats. It is used principally to control people who are dissatisfied with the way those in authority are doing their jobs. When individuals show annoyance, the person in power or with privileged information or expertise will make them feel they are not calm enough to deal with the situation rationally. A lack of calm suggests a lack of courage, intelligence, or professionalism.

Calm was the quality most admired by World War I generals in themselves and in their troops. Since then, calm incompetence has risen to become a quality of high professionalism. A loss of calm in a catastrophe is seen to be worse than cowardly; it indicates a lack of breeding as well as inappropriate amateurism. Outsiders are amateurs.

The cliché of calm as a virtue was captured in Rudyard Kipling's "If you can keep your head when all about you. . . ." But Kipling was far too smart to mean that people should be victims of incompetence or mulishly stubborn or blindly loyal to either their professions or their class. He was talking about deft, razor-sharp coolness; a fast, flexible mind capable of admitting error and adjusting to circumstance; a talent for reaction to crisis with white-heat action or invisible subtlety.

The captain of the *Titanic* was no doubt pleased that his male passengers in first class remained calm as they waited to drown. Had they been less controlled they might have found some small satisfaction in passing their time by throwing him overboard.

CANADA. 1. So complicated that nobody knows how it works, which causes Canadian social scientists to talk about it all the time, which causes foreigners to say it's boring because nothing ever happens;

2. The most decentralized country in existence, which causes Canadians to complain constantly about the power of the central government;

3. Administered under the third-oldest constitution in the world, which causes Canadians to insist that it has never worked and

must be changed;

4. The only major country in which the two leading Western cultures have managed to live peacefully together for several centuries, causing Canadians to insist they cannot live together;



5. Burdened by the laziest elite of any developed nation; people who have made their fortunes by selling off the country's resources and by working for more energetic foreigners. They are most comfortable on their knees, admiring those from larger countries who have purchased them;

6. A country where 95 percent of the land is north of the major cities, which causes its urban inhabitants to treat their hinterland as an embarrassing and backward region, while pretending that they themselves are situated hundreds of miles to the south, somewhere between New York and Florida. (See **FLORIDA.**)

CONSUMPTION.

You can never get enough of what you don't really want. —Eric Hoffer

The problem with markets dependent on consumption is that consumers cannot be relied upon to know what they want.

Consumers are unreliable. The producer must constantly try to outguess them. This is risky and tiring. Above all, in a stable middle-class society, people don't need or want enough goods to support an economy built upon their desire to consume. They already have a great deal. There is only so much room in their houses. Their family size shrinks as their class level rises. The middle-class mentality inevitably admires restraint and care, and seeks quality goods that last and can be repaired.

It is therefore more rational simply to decide what people should want, then tell them they need it, then sell it to them. This three-step process is called consumption.

DANDRUFF. The answer is usually vinegar. To some problems there are solutions.

What we call dandruff is often the result of a pH imbalance on the skin, which shampoo exacerbates. Wash your hair with a simple nondetergent shampoo, soap, olive oil, beer, almost anything. Rinse. Then close your eyes and pour on some vinegar. The extremely cheap but natural sort—apple cider, for example—is probably best. The smell will stimulate interesting conversations in changing-room showers and your explanation will win you friends. Wait 30 to 60 seconds. Rinse it off. The smell will go away. So will your dandruff.

All dermatologists, pharmacists, and pharmaceutical companies know this simple secret. They don't tell you because they make money by converting dandruff into a complex medical and social problem. By most professional standards this would amount to legally defined incompetence or misrepresentation.

Dandruff shampoos that promise to keep your shoulders and even your head clean are harsh detergents and may promote baldness. Advising people to use them ought to constitute malpractice.

DEATH. Something that has happened—although this has not been statistically verified—to everyone who has lived, with a few disputed exceptions. As neither Christ nor His Mother nor the Buddha ascended bodily in the presence of licensed medical practitioners, it could be argued that while not everyone is dead, everyone who has lived has eventually died. In a world filled with risk and speculation, death remains one of the few things that can be relied upon. It is more inevitable even than birth, since we cannot say that everyone who could have been born was born.

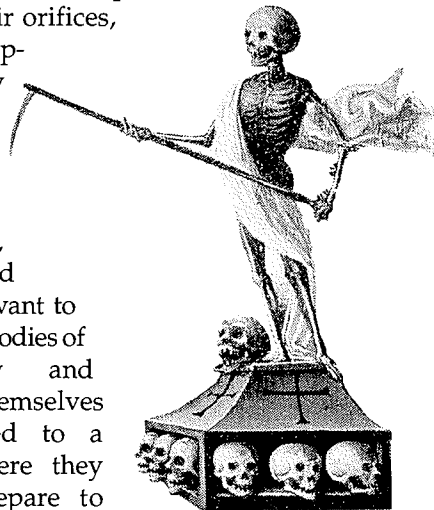
In its struggle to preserve the human body, modern medicine has achieved what we now call miracles. Still, it hasn't saved anyone from death, just postponed the ap-

pointment. These admirable delays are generally treated as the greatest accomplishments of modern civilization. Lives have been saved, we say, when we mean prolonged. That small slip of the tongue betrays the great cliché—that we do not want to die.

Our growing technical sophistication seems to have had a negative effect on the reasonableness with which we face death. Where once it was treated with a certain bluntness, as part of family life, we have fallen back on childish denial. We don't die, we pass on, we decess, we are the late dearly beloved, people are sorry to hear about us. To hear what? There has never been an era in which death was such an unacceptable topic of conversation. Humans have never so planned their prolonged lives and taken so little account of their termination.

Among the possible explanations for this change is the decline of organized religion. However, more compelling is modern society's obsession with function. The overwhelming importance now attached to what people do is the natural product of a society that defines itself by its systems and structures. These systems have no meaning in themselves, but they function as if they were eternal. Like medicine with lives, they prolong conscious limitation out of sight.

Millions of people, either old or terminally sick, lie in hospitals with tubes up all their orifices, waiting. Apparently they are not waiting for death. If they were, they would probably want to free their bodies of machinery and have themselves transported to a place where they might prepare to



take leave of their family and friends and then consider their life as it was lived and then consider the approaching bridge or cliff.

Conscious thought isn't greatly admired in a civilization devoted to systems. Active consciousness is seen as a form of rebellion. And yet what possible harm could self-doubt do when the doubter is no longer strong enough to walk, let alone preach?

Neither current education nor the life that follows is designed to prepare the individual for that inner conversation. The sight of millions of self-doubting diers—*compos mentis* or not—would sow doubt among those still proceeding through their stages of specialization and promotion. Besides, care of the human body is a specialist profession to be handled as part of a continuous process. To remove individuals from that system before it has finished with their bodies would be to suggest either that that process is less important than this civilization says it is or that the medical profession is not doing its job properly.

DOUBT. The only human activity capable of controlling the use of power in a positive way. Doubt is central to understanding.

The elites of organized societies define leadership as knowing what to do. The citizenry is not so certain. Its response is to doubt, consider, and deliberate. That is, to question, contemplate, and weigh carefully.

Most human activities are divided into three stages. The act of doubting is the second and is the only one that requires the conscious application of our intelligence.

The first stage consists of the reality by which we are faced. This is always a confusing mixture of situations out of our control, attitudes clouded by received wisdom, and a variety of cure-all solutions. The third stage is what we call decision making. In a rational society, this is supposed to be the result of having a solution produced by the correct answer. Decision making is, in fact, an overrated business, rarely more than

mechanistic. It, in turn, is followed by a minor, passive business—the management of the decision taken. Given our obsessions with leadership and right answers and our fear of doubt, we have slipped into treating this managerial stage as if it were of primary importance.

Doubt is thus the space between reality and the application of an idea. It ought to be given over to the weighing of experience, intuition, creativity, ethics, common sense, reason, and, of course, knowledge, in balanced consideration of what is to be done. The longer this stage lasts, the more we take advantage of our intelligence.

Perhaps this is why elites move so quickly to limit doubt and consideration. Those who gain power almost automatically seek to leap from reality to solution, from abstraction to application, from ideology to methodology. This is as true of contemporary rational society as it was of those dominated by religion or monarchies. Deliberation is mocked as weakness. Consideration is rushed through, if possible eliminated. The effect is to reduce the intelligence of the citizenry to received wisdom, unconscious or secretive procedures, and mechanistic actions.

Healthy democracies embrace doubt as a leisurely pleasure, and so prosper. Sick democracies are obsessed by answers and management and so lose their reason for existence. But above all, doubt is the only activity that actively makes use of the human particularity.

FLORIDA. Former American state. Latin Americans are now locked in a long-term struggle with Canadians for control. The Latin Americans are driven by their need for financial and political stability, the Canadians by theirs for warmth and a place to die. The ultimate weapons of the Latin Americans are politically based para-military groups and organized crime financed by drug money. The Canadians have set up a professional hockey team.

HAPPY HOUR. A depressing comment on the rest of the day and a victory for the most limited Dionysian view of human nature.



SEX. Despite being a common activity, demand always runs ahead of supply. This has made sex the market-driven aspect of personal relationships, running somewhere behind property in the schema of economics.

Demand, in sex as in commerce, is an irrational mystery. The long-term contractual approach requires property arrangements such as marriage. In the speculative pay-as-you-go market, sex is often linked to meals and entertainment. In either case, it has become the most successful bull market of the last three decades. Theoretical demand stretches so far ahead of real supply that sex has become the opiate of the people.

In 1992, a French court established the per-session value of sex between a husband and wife. The man had been denied intercourse for two-and-a-half months after a doctor mistakenly daubed his penis with acid during a treatment. Damages were awarded on the basis of FF300 per missed coupling. The court was not suggesting that this was the absolute value of sex or the value of sex between that particular couple. Rather, they were ruling that, since money is our society's only regulated reward system, sex must have an equivalent monetary value and in that particular market—a small provincial town—it was worth FF300 per session. The couple might have received 10 or 20 times more had they lived in an expensive district in a major city.

UNIVERSITY. A place in which a civilization's knowledge is divided up into exclusive territories.

The principal occupation of the academic

community is to invent dialects sufficiently hermetic to prevent knowledge from passing between territories. By maintaining a constant flow of written material among the specialists of each group, academics are able to assert the acceptable technique of communication intended to prevent communications. This, in turn, establishes a standard that allows them to dismiss those who seek to communicate through generally accessible language as dilettantes, deformers, or popularizers.

WEATHER FORECASTERS. Experts who never apologize for being wrong.

The concept of expertise seems to negate that of accountability. Thus, while there is nothing remarkable about being wrong, it is astonishing to speak to the same audience the next day without either an apology or some sort of explanation. Since for the purposes of argument it must be assumed that neither speaker nor listener has received a blow to the head during the intervening hours, there is a suggestion that either the expert or the expert-worshiper cannot bear the admission of error and therefore of a flawed past and therefore of memory. Like sunshine and rain, expertise always resides in the future.

YES. An affirmation that results in sexual, commercial, or political consumption. Deliberate confusion of the three is central to advertising and public relations.

The underlying argument that accompanies this word is that we must not be afraid to say yes. "Say yes to life." The suggestion is that it takes courage to take a risk. In reality, yes is the traditional response of the passive party to the lover or the salesman or the person with power. If courage is to be treated as a serious factor, then it must take the form either of a no or of a negotiation for better terms. Modern politics at its most cynical sells the courage to say yes.