

Letter – 1

Note: The following letter was written against the backdrop of a spate of vituperative letters that deluged the ‘letters’ columns of the above newspaper at the beginning of 1988. This letter appeared on February 11, 1988.

Utter misuse of a useful forum

Allow me to make some observations about the letters that appear in this column.

Ideally, this feature of a newspaper offers a meeting-point for ideas advanced by writers, who may not always see eye to eye, but who would nevertheless pick their words with discernment if not with delicacy; “nor harsh nor grating, but of ample power to edify and entertain” (apologies to Wordsworth). Happily, your correspondents for the most part observe these norms, and their letters are a constant source of delight to others.

Every now and then, however, readers are caught in a kind of crossfire, rather like bystanders who are at a loss when snipers are at large.

Granted, it behoves a newspaper to provide a forum for writers of all shades of opinion on matters of topical interest. Also, it should offer a medium for conveying feelings and frustrations when one fails to find redress for one’s grievances. For all that, the editor must also ensure that the writers do not breach the norms of intellectual honesty and restraint of language.

Language use can cut both ways; equally to give pleasure and to inflict pain. It depends on the user and how he wields it. It can dispel prejudice and foster tolerance. Conversely, it can trifle with truth and wound feelings. It is this latter use that one would take exception to.

Reading letters of this kind is not conducive to enjoyment, whether they dwell *-ad nauseam-* on empires and empire-builders long gone, or denigrate countries and peoples other than their own, or make disparaging personal remarks about others, or simply fawn on countries they fondly hope to adopt as their own. If they are not derisive and churlish, they are untruthful or patronizing to say the least. Or at times obsequious! Moreover, such authors are naïve enough to think that it is easy to exploit the credulity of the reading public.

For instance, a certain correspondent, in touting a political institution of yesterday, wants us to believe that it is harmless, even desirable. Again, another writer insists that certain countries can do no wrong, regardless of whether they have committed genocide, or foisted dictators on an unwilling populace, or brought down popular leaders who stood up to them.

And, like Squealer in *Animal Farm*, each one reels off ‘facts and figures’ to furnish an excuse for his argument: “Four legs good, two legs bad.” The fact is that mendacity makes a mockery of meaning. The long-term risks of mendacious language were succinctly stated by Philip Knightly in an article he wrote and I quote: “a degeneration of

respect for words and their meaning, a degeneration of respect for their target, and a re-shaping of our very concept of truth.’*

May I suggest that you delegate someone who can quote chapter and verse in order to verify the claims of correspondents such as these? If in doing so, he occasionally keels over in a fit of laughing, let him merely consider it an occupational hazard. You would call him a ‘factologist’, I believe.

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Riyadh

*”The Language of Mendacity” by Philip Knightly in *New Internationalist*,
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