

Alderman or Councillor - Is it a Tempest in a Teapot? by Christine Mowat

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Gender-neutral language has always been part of plain language writing. So it was with great interest that I watched Edmonton City Council debate whether to call themselves aldermen or councillors.

For some folks, the masculinization of language is so institutionalized and invisible that gender-neutral language seems radical and impractical. The linguistic exclusion of women in words such as *alderman*, *chairman* or *workman* may be regarded as inconsequential. The argument put forward is that *mankind* or *he* or *alderman* stand objectively and neutrally for both men and women. Our minds are enmeshed in the paternalism of English, and, it is suggested, will always be thus. "And *God* made man" does produce two involuntary male images for most people. But so what? The masculine denotes the feminine, or so the argument and many legal contracts say.

So, is this debate simply a tempest in a teapot?

To decide the issue, consider the array of literature, actual government regulations and practice, and research surrounding the issue of gender-neutral language. In North America and Europe, the last decades have seen greater attention paid to questions of sex and gender in language. That language creates reality is a deeply felt and many-times-over proved assumption of the disciplines which tackle the issue of sexism in language: philosophy, psychology, linguistics, education, women's studies, and the law.

Since the early seventies, innumerable organizations have published non-sexist guidelines - the National Council of Teachers of English, the largest English teaching organization in the world, was one of the first. Three levels of Canadian governments have published policies on equitable language. Canadian Universities all have their own gender-neutral guides. It's been several years since Workers' Compensation Board shed its Workmen's Compensation Board title as outdated. Whole government agencies and other organizations have changed their names to reflect their actual constituency. Canada Manpower has become Canada Employment Centre, and the National Museum of Man has become the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Recently, benchers adopted a non-sexist communications policy for the Law Society of Alberta. Boards of Education across Canada have adopted policies on gender inclusive communications. Almost every modern book on government and business writing argues for gender neutral language choices. Even Christian churches—the Anglican, United, and Unitarian churches - have all now produced hymnals with gender-neutral language.

The following list of quotations support the use of *councillor*, the term already in the City of Edmonton's *Policies and Procedures Bylaw*:

. . . a statute should not use a masculine form when a correct user of the language would use a neutral form . .

The language of legislation should not offend any of its readers. Increasing numbers of men and women are offended by language they consider sexist, believing the such language creates images that are inappropriate today.

In our opinion, the use of a non-sexist style in English results in better drafting.

(all from *Clarity*, the British plain language journal, June, 1994, in an article by Donald Revell, Chief Legislative Counsel for Ontario since 1987)

Under Section 2 of the new Statute Revision Act, Legislative Counsel has the following new or expended powers:

- to alter language and punctuation to achieve a clear, consistent and gender neutral style.

(Province of British Columbia Revision Notes, October, 1992)

2. Policy

It is the policy of the government to eliminate sexual stereotyping from all government communications.

Avoid generic terms and titles which use "man" to represent humanity...

(Treasury Board of Canada, *Administrative Policy Manual*, 1982)

New sex-inclusive language . . . includes member of Congress and representative . . . a member of a Council, city or otherwise, is a councillor...

(*The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, 1980)

Eliminate titles and terms which suggest that a job is not typically performed by a woman (or man).

(*The Canadian Style: A Guide to Writing and Editing*, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, 1985)

Originally, man meant human or person, but over the years it has come to be used both generically and to denote male human beings only . . . Below is a list of common false generics and some suggested alternatives. This guide suggests alternatives only to those words or phrases that obviously exclude women (not manage, mandate, or manuscript, for example).

Instead of Use

alderman councillor
businessman businessperson
man human beings; people;
individuals
man-days worker/days etc.

(*Communicating Without Bias: Guidelines for Government*, Province of British Columbia, 1992)

On November 8, 1994, the City of Edmonton Council had an opportunity to clarify its leadership in official equitable language use. A vote for *alderman* would have been seen as an anomaly in a sea of modern policies, an uninformed and retrograde step. Council voted to retain the traditional *alderman* designation.

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