Five things

Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, UN human rights chief

When the Myanmar army began driving Rohingya Muslims from their villages, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights hit the headlines by accusing the authorities of ethnic cleansing. Here are five things about the UN agency’s first Muslim head:
1. He is a prince of the Hashemite family which rules in Jordan, the son of the former Court Chamberlain, Prince Ra’ad, and Swedish-born Margaretha Lind.
2. A career diplomat, he has a strong background in human rights, having worked to found the International Criminal Court in The Hague.
3. He says he now has a ‘quite cool’ relationship with Jordan. Arab governments, he told Foreign Policy, believe ‘in a very tribal sense’ that it is not his job to disclose their dirty laundry. ‘I don’t respond well to pressure from any government,’ he says.
4. Most surprised to be the butt of his critiques are western leaders. In September last year, he named Donald Trump, Geert Wilders, the Dutch politician, Prime Minister Victor Orban of Hungary, Milos Zeman of the Czech Republic and Robert Fico of Slovakia, along with Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French National Front, as among politicians who used the same tactics as the Islamic State group. Russia protested against the attack on candidate Trump. Zeid delights in baiting racists with his heritage — a ‘white-skinned Muslim whose mother is European and father Arab.’
5. Given that strict adherence to the defence of human rights is being given less priority in Washington and many other capitals, he does not expect the UN General Assembly to renew his mandate next year. His legacy, he hopes, will be ‘a whole generation of young Arab activists and lawyers’.

Jargonbuster

Ongoing insults to the ear

Britain’s impending departure from the European Union continues to spawn words and phrases that are bad enough when new but worse when over-used.

‘Brexitis’ itself was an ugly enough coinage, but it is too late to complain about that. It is too short and too useful to journalists to be uninvented. But there is still hope that some variants of it can be beaten back. Attempts have been made, for example, to get ‘Brexodus’ to catch on, to describe the flight of professionals from the UK before March 2019. This is not only a regrettable word, but premature.

Then there is the Liberal Democrat slogan, ‘Exit from Brexit’. How can one begin to explain, gently, that the portmanteau word Brexit already contains the word exit and that exiting from an exit is not the same as reversing it?

But these are negative observations. This column has a duty, if it is going to complain about the overuse of ugly words, to suggest alternatives. Fortunately, expert help is at hand. Dominic Watt, senior linguistics lecturer at York University, has published research into words that have fallen out of use — many of which he thinks should be rescued from obscurity. ‘Dowsabel’ means a sweetheart; ‘sillytonian’ is a foolish or gullible person; ‘ear-rent’ is the cost to the listener of trivial or incessant talk; while ‘merry-go-sorry’ is mixture of joy and sorrow. These are adornments compared with Brexodus or skillset, learnings, ideation and synergize.

We should not resist new words for the sake of it. All words were new once, and many coinages, derided as horrible in their time, have become acceptable. As Rebecca Gowers has observed, Milton appears to have coined awestruck; Dryden, daydream; Coleridge, soulmate. But that does not mean we have ever to be reconciled to ‘ongoing’. Nor should we overlook past enrichments of the language that have been unjustly forgotten. ‘Seldom’ is used too seldom these days. As is ‘splendid!’. And ‘boondoggle’, a wasteful or excessively expensive project. Or ‘gongoozler’, ‘an idle and inquisitive person who stands staring for prolonged periods at anything out of the common’. Then there is ‘boris-noris’: ‘going on blindly, without any thought of risk or decency’, according to A Glossary of Dorset Dialect, 1863.

Let us join Dr Watt in scouring old books for words that have fallen into disuse — or desuetude — and vow to use them as often as possible. Send your jargon suggestions to letters@theworldtoday.org.