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Olympia politicians: Avoid these clichés like the plague

HIGHLIGHTS

Lawmakers' prowess at abusing clichés was on full display at Jan. 7 press event

'Glass half-full' and 'I'm an optimist' top list of phrases that should be retired

3rd annual list of political clichés overused in Washington state politics



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There's nothing reporters love more than half-answered questions.

Fortunately, there were plenty of those to go around at The Associated Press Legislative Preview on Thursday (Jan. 7). For two hours, Washington state lawmakers evaded questions such as, "Why aren't you going to fix education funding this year?" by leaning on many of the convenient political platitudes that we've all heard before.

It was a grand trotting-out of clichés to start the new year right — and reminded me why, every year, I make a list of the most overused phrases in Washington politics, hoping that they'll never be used again.

Clearly, my past messages have gone unheeded. Thursday’s press event was a “perfect storm” of clichés that I have previously asked politicians (and those of us who write about them) to ban after rampant overuse in 2013 and 2014. As always, though, there were new offenders in the past year that inspired eye-rolls among members of the Olympia press corps.

Here are some of the worst, most meaningless and overused clichés we heard Washington state politicians use in 2015. By adding them to my ongoing list, I am pledging to avoid using them or quoting them in my stories in the coming year, and every year thereafter.

Here’s hoping that some of Washington’s politicians might do the same in their speeches.

1. “The glass is half full”

Translation: Unlike pessimists, I don’t see a glass as half-empty, but half-full. Things aren’t as bad as they seem. We can get this done. I’m a believer. Etc.

Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, used this at nearly all of his weekly press conferences in 2015 to answer almost any question from a reporter.

Questions such as, “How are budget negotiations going? Will the Legislature finish its work on time this year? How are you going to get that bill through the Democratic-controlled House?” were often met with the same response.

“I still believe the glass is half full,” Schoesler would say, or some variation thereof.

On Thursday, Schoesler fired off a monologue that included so many glass-half-full statements that we realized he’s not done with this phrase. And he might just be mocking us a little bit by using the statement in as many sentences as possible.

“Last year I told you that the glass is half full. I still think the glass is half full,” Schoesler said.

He later added: “I’m going to remain the person who says the glass is half full.”



“I STILL BELIEVE THE GLASS IS HALF FULL.”

Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville

2. “I’m an optimist”

Translation: See “The glass is half full;” I believe we can do this, I have faith. Etc.

This is usually what Schoesler says directly after saying, “The glass is half-full.” However, other politicians say it, too.

Unfortunately, simply saying “I’m an optimist” does little to tell others why they should be optimistic about, say, the Legislature’s chances of getting done on time this year. (Last year, they went into triple-overtime to approve a budget, despite Schoesler’s persistent optimism.)

On Thursday, House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, also used “I’m an optimist” to describe why he thinks lawmakers can finish solving the state’s school funding crisis next year, which will be their last chance before hitting a 2018 deadline set by the state Supreme Court.

Let's hope Sullivan's optimism does more to bring about a school-funding solution than Schoesler's did to get the Legislature out of town last year. While lawmakers averted a government shutdown in 2015, they stayed in Olympia through mid-July, setting a record for the most days in session in single year.

That kind of record can make for fairly pessimistic reporters.

3. "Poison pill"

Translation: Something included in a piece of legislation that will make it difficult for one party or the other to vote for it, or could effectively kill the bill.

In business, a poison pill has a specific meaning: it is a shareholder rights plan corporations use as a defense against takeovers.

In politics, however, politicians too often use "poison pill" to refer to any part of a proposal that they don't like.

For instance, in exchange for raising the state's gas tax, Republicans last year wanted some assurance that Gov. Jay Inslee wouldn't enact a low-carbon fuel standard, something they said would raise gas prices too much. The language Republicans proposed to restrict Inslee's ability to implement a clean fuel standard was called "a poison pill" by Democrats.

Ultimately, the language was accepted and the Legislature approved \$16 billion in transportation spending, a move both parties praised as necessary for the state. But is that swallowing a "poison pill," or simply compromising to accomplish something?

I know: Let's go with the option that has the most martyr-like connotations, shall we?

4. "The 11th hour"

Translation: The last possible moment (as in, the last hour before the clock strikes 12, or midnight)

Calling something the "11th hour" once is probably fine. But if you're the state Republican Party, you might want to avoid sending out six emails over three days in June using the term to refer to the Legislature's last-minute budget negotiations.

By the time I receive an email with the subject line, "11th hour #6," the phrase has lost its impact.



"LOOK, I'M AN OPTIMIST."

House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington

5. "Kicking the can down the road"

Translation: Delaying action, or taking a short-term action now that will delay arriving at a long-term solution.

Guidelines for use: When your party delays making a court-ordered policy fix, it's to gather more information to make an informed decision. But if others propose a delay, they're "kicking the can down the road."

The phrase evokes an image of immaturity, as children and adolescents are the ones who come to mind when you envision someone kicking a tin can in the street.

The fact that this phrase is routinely applied to nearly every pressing policy issue in the state (mental health, education funding, the operating budget, you name it) makes it lose its meaning when you're trying to talk in detail about a specific topic.

6. Comparing things to “the Wild West”

Translation: Something that is unregulated and has few restrictions, perhaps because it is a new technology or new practice.

When lawmakers were debating proposed drone regulations in 2014, proponents of new restrictions called the world of unmanned aerial vehicles “the Wild West,” due to the lack of rules for the new technology.

Last year, politicians also compared the state's proliferation of unlicensed medical marijuana dispensaries to “the Wild West” as they were working to merge the state's recreational and medical marijuana systems.

Besides the comparison losing its charm over time, I think the Wild West evokes different things for different people, and may not be a clear way to communicate a perceived lack of law and order.

You may think of one-sheriff towns, but I think of corsets.

7. “Not ruling it out”

Translation: I haven't decided whether I will do this/ run for this / support this, but I want to give you as little information about my plans as possible. That way, whatever decision I make, this conversation doesn't come back to bite me later.

Just tell me whether you're running for office already, and save us both a bunch of time. Please?

Or maybe you just want to keep us guessing, and keep your name in the news.

Somehow, there is an element of ego in saying “I'm not ruling it out,” which feels different from saying, “I'm considering my options” or “I have yet to make a decision.”

The News Tribune's Sean Robinson identified this subtlety when suggesting this overused phrase for my list via Twitter.

“As for me, I'm not ruling out galactic conquest, but I have to consult with my advisers,” he tweeted.

8. “A perfect storm”

Translation: A confluence of factors that either create a crisis or make an issue especially difficult to solve.

The only problem is, so many things are now called a perfect storm. How many complicating factors does it take to make something a perfect storm, versus just something that's on your to-do-list?

Apparently, two factors is enough. On Thursday, Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, called the state's court mandate to correct education funding problems by 2018 — combined with school districts losing some of their property tax authority that year — “a perfect storm.”

Maybe he's on to something: Calling a problem “a perfect storm” now makes it easier to explain later why you couldn't navigate through it.

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