



British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

At a Loss for Words: Conversation in an Age of Rage

By Carol Off

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics — take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author bio

[Carol Off](#) spent almost sixteen years co-hosting the multi-award-winning CBC radio program, *As It Happens*. Before that, she covered news and current affairs in Canada and around the world. As a radio correspondent, she reported on politics in Ottawa and Quebec. As a television journalist, she covered the break-up of Yugoslavia, the 9/11 attack on the United States, the election of Vladimir Putin, and politics, conflicts and culture throughout Europe, the United States, the Middle East and Africa. Her first bestselling book, *The Lion, The Fox and the Eagle: A Story of Generals and Justice in Yugoslavia and Rwanda*, was published in 2000. Since then, she's written three more award-winning works of narrative non-fiction, including, most recently,

All We Leave Behind: A Reporter’s Journey into the Lives of Others, winner of the British Columbia National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction.¹

Summary

At a Loss for Words: Conversation in an Age of Rage explores how key civic words — notably freedom, democracy, truth, woke, choice and taxes — have become unstable, politicized and increasingly detached from shared meaning. Drawing on history, political analysis and contemporary examples, Off argues that public language is not simply changing. It is being strategically reshaped in ways that fuel division, distrust, grievance and democratic erosion.

While the book is rooted largely in European and North American political contexts, it raises global questions about what happens when public language can no longer hold nuance, shared reference or democratic trust. If language shapes political life, and political life shapes our daily lives — what happens when we think the same words mean wildly different things?

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Freedom of expression, democratic participation and equality are foundational human rights principles. In British Columbia, these rights are protected through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and B.C.’s *Human Rights Code*. At a Loss for Words raises questions about what happens when public language becomes unstable, manipulated or emptied of shared meaning. If people cannot trust the words used to describe freedom, democracy, truth or choice, it becomes harder to participate meaningfully in civic life and to protect the rights those words are meant to name.

As the Human Rights Commissioner found in her inquiry into the rise of hate during the COVID-19 pandemic, the undermining of our shared understanding of truth has significant human rights implications. False or misleading information can fuel discrimination and hate by promoting stereotypes, biases and conspiracy theories that target specific groups. It can also harm democracy by misleading voters, reducing trust in institutions and making it harder for people to identify what is true and act on reliable information. When misinformation spreads faster than truth, it

¹ “Carol Off,” Penguin Random House Canada, accessed April 2026, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/authors/22670/carol-off>.



becomes more difficult for people to make informed decisions that protect themselves and others.

Finally, *At a Loss for Words* invites reflection on what it means to care for public language in a time of speed, polarization and manipulation. Human rights protections depend not only on laws and institutions, but also on people's ability to communicate across difference, identify harm when it occurs, and act on information that is credible and grounded in reality. Off weaves examples from many incidents in history – some as recent as the last few years – and across nations to illustrate how our ideas around human rights have both evolved and circled back on themselves. The book inspires readers to consider what meanings we attribute to democracy and human rights concepts, and how that might influence our access to human rights protections in B.C.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not exhaustive, but offer some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

Language and eroding civic discourse

Off writes: “Our inability to talk to each other isn’t an accident: it’s the objective of those who can only get what they want if they turn us into adversaries.”

When you think about someone whose politics, values or opinions differ from your own, what do you know about them, and what have you been told about them? How do media, political actors and online spaces shape the stories we tell about one another? What helps people stay in relationship across difference, and what makes that harder? It can be easy to fall into echo chambers – online or real-world spaces in which we are surrounded by only those we agree with. Sometimes, language can be used to divide people into simplified camps, making others seem irrational, threatening or beyond understanding. Social media tends to show the most extreme opinions or viewpoints. It can be difficult to separate those extreme voices from people who hold milder or more nuanced views on the same subjects.

Building trust across difference can include curiosity, shared experience, slower conversation, or resisting the urge to reduce others to caricatures. At the same time, we can reflect on the limits of dialogue — especially when language is being deliberately used to inflame fear, resentment or hostility.



Freedom and collective life

What do you think Off means when she suggests that freedom is achieved, not through “atomized individuality”, but through collectivism? Can you think of a time when your own sense of freedom was made possible through relationship, community or public systems rather than through independence alone?

Freedom is often described as the absence of limits or interference. Freedom may also depend on the presence of social conditions that allow people to live with dignity, safety and mutual care. For example, adequate parental leave policies and access to nutritious, affordable food can help people live fuller and freer lives — the concept of “freedom from want” that Off discusses in the book. Many cultures express and maintain freedom through the spirit of collective responsibility and liberation, rather than a hyper-individualized view of freedom.

What histories of freedom are missing?

As Off traces the meaning of words like freedom and democracy, she focuses primarily on European and more modern North American politics and history. How might the book read differently if it canvassed Indigenous legal approaches to human rights issues or democratic elements outside Europe and North America? What do you know about political systems that have originated outside of Europe and how can you find out more?

No single region or civilization owns the language of freedom. Looking beyond Europe and colonial North America, we might understand that freedom is not only about individual rights, but can also be grounded in responsibilities to community, land, kinship and collective survival. Broadening the frame in this way might help deepen Off’s argument, while also exposing some of its limits. Civic language is always shaped by power, including which histories are remembered, and which are left out.

Following the Commissioner’s Inquiry From Hate to Hope, we learned more about how different communities across B.C. strengthen community connections and democratic resiliency by thinking and acting in ways that protect a shared sense of freedom. **You can learn more about the Inquiry by visiting bchumanrights.ca/hate.**

Truth, misinformation and public trust



Off argues that truth has become one of the most unstable words in public life. In an age of social media, endless information and “alternative facts”, what helps you decide what is credible? Who do you trust and why? What happens to democratic life when people no longer agree on what is real — or no longer believe that truth matters?

Human rights protections, public health, journalism and democratic accountability all depend on a shared commitment to evidence, honesty and reality. Increasingly, we require media literacy skills to understand how bias shows up in news reports and articles.

People often decide what is credible based on a mix of factors: whether the source is transparent, whether claims can be checked against evidence, and whether the information is trying to inform, rather than inflame. Trust can be built through consistency, accountability and a willingness to correct error.

Visit [BCOHRC’s Can You Stop It campaign](#) to learn how to spot and stop the spread of misinformation.

‘Woke’ and the politics of dismissal

Off explores how the word woke has shifted from a term rooted in political awareness to a catch-all insult used to dismiss efforts toward equity and justice. Have you seen “woke” used to shut down conversation rather than deepen it? What does woke mean to you?

Language can be used to make certain concerns seem unserious, excessive or threatening, particularly concerns related to race, gender, sexuality and colonialism. When public language becomes less about understanding each other, and more about dismissing or mocking one another, the division and hateful rhetoric only grow.

The term woke came from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as a metaphor for awareness of social injustices, particularly racist systemic oppression. History of its use dates to the 1920s and it was especially popularized and mainstreamed in the last 10 years. Today, Black liberation movements including Black Lives Matter, have largely abandoned using the word woke, for fear of its on-going co-optation and disparaging use by politicians and pundits.

Taxes, solidarity and the public good



Off takes up the word taxes not simply as a matter of money, but as a question about what we owe one another. What kinds of societies become possible when people see taxes as a shared contribution to collective life? What happens when taxes are framed only as theft, burden or government overreach? How do schools, libraries, health care, transit, housing or emergency services shape our sense of freedom, safety and belonging?

Taxes may not sound like a human rights issue at first, but they are closely tied to the public systems that make dignity possible. Taxation builds care, mutual responsibility and the shared maintenance of a livable society. Through taxation, governments can offer basic human and community services to aid in the care and dignified living of their citizens, including water treatment, community centres, libraries, public transportation, parks maintenance and access to public education. Taxes also fund income safety nets for citizens during times of economic hardship: subsidized daycare, employment insurance, old-age security, access to public health care and student loans for example.

When people reject the very idea of collective contribution, they may also weaken the institutions that protect the vulnerable and sustain the common good.

