

This time it's PERSONAL

Welcome to your personal copy of *LSE Magazine*. You may think that because 60,000 copies have been printed and distributed, and are being read everywhere from Beijing to Barcelona, that there's nothing special about this one. But there is, because it's just for you. No one else can read it, and it can sit in your briefcase or bag (your personal information storage pack) for your own personal use.

You will realise, I hope, that I'm kidding. But only kidding a bit. Look around. There's a lot of 'personal' about these days, quite a plague in fact, and a spiralling range of things, services, activities, objects, and

communications have stealthily become 'personal'. The events, commodities, and interactions to which the term is applied are of wildly different types, and sometimes the range is bewildering, but they all suggest that you, or me, or her, or him are unique, and uniquely privileged. Try some of these:

Personal number plate
Personal hygiene
Personal assistant
Personal property
Personal saviour
Personal stereo
Personal trainer
Personal copy
Personal problems
Personal physician
This time it's personal
Personal chair
Personal access to school databases
Personal profile
Personal abuse
Personal crusade
Personal notepaper
Personal affront
Personal cheque

When you look a bit more closely, there's a chaos of meanings.

Personal hygiene means washing your person. The personal means the intimately physical. Personal assistant, in most cases, means nothing of the kind. Personal abuse may be abuse of your

physical person: 'Who cut your hair? Was it the council garden's

department?' But it may be of your taste in reading or music, or your loyalties in sport. Personal notepaper means it has your name on it.

Personal property simply means you own it, with or without insignia.

I blame Hugh Gaitskell. One of the earliest known sightings of 'personal' was in 1959 when the Labour Party published its glossy covered election manifesto under the title *Your personal guide to the future Labour offers YOU*. The promise was

clear enough. Up there in London, the party's national executive was moving slowly and resolutely through each item on the agenda: 'Right, comrades, item 740, we now have to consider the future the party is going to offer to Rodney Barker at 5, Queen's Road, Kenilworth.' You can just see them, working on late into the wee small hours: 'Item 17,567, 345: the future the party is going to offer to Jack Straw, Railway Cuttings, Blackburn. Student radicalism followed by foreign secretary? What do people think?' 'Item 17, 567, 346: Marjorie Mowlam...'

I doubt anyone was fooled. But if not, there has been a lot of superfluous 'personal' around ever since. If you promise to give a matter your personal attention, what other attention could you, and not someone else, give it? If you abuse someone, how could it be other than personal? If you own something, to what person, other than you, could it belong?

So what is going on? The proliferation of 'personal' happened just when a lot of the lives of a lot of people were becoming less individual, more collectivised, regulated, regimented, and marshalled into patterns. From clothing which proclaims not the wearer's individual taste but the manufacturer's name, to cars which are the same as those driven by everyone else, to books which are read because a hundred thousand other people are reading them, and brand loyalty in everything from God to pickled onions, we say who we are by lining up with everyone else and saying we are just like them. It's the sluggish dark side of Hegel's vision of realising your true nature by seeing yourself as part of a wider, social whole. Being one of the boys may be the upside, being lost in the crowd is the downside. 'Personal' is the reaction to this, the pretence that when you buy number five and a half million of anything, it is still unique, just for you. We add flavour to sameness by sprinkling 'personal' like tabasco sauce on the bland tastes of the collective. Fortunately I can stand back and look at things from a safe distance: I wrote this on my personal computer. ■

