



MAYORAL MEMO - 31 AUGUST 2022

Teenagers are clever. They can slip any argument on its head and insert a straw man quicker than you can blink.

Take this interaction.

Teenager: "There is a big party on Thursday night that *everyone* is going to. Can I please stay out until midnight?"

Parent: "You know your curfew is 10pm and you have school on Friday."

Teenager (exasperated): "But it doesn't even start until 9pm and I will be so embarrassed leaving at 10. I won't even go if I have to be home that early and all my friends will be there. Don't you care about my happiness? Do you even love me???"

Parent: "Of course I love you and..." Bang! You didn't even notice it but the teenager just slotted in a fantastic straw man argument without you even noticing it. Then, of course, you are defending the indefensible. How could any parent argue *against* the fact they love their child? The

argument has been cleverly twisted away from the curfew to a different discussion entirely.

This is exactly what a straw man argument is designed to do. Take a sensible debate with opposing views and then distort or exaggerate the argument to the extreme and then attack that extreme distortion. The 'straw man' is an imaginary opponent that is easily defeated.

The history of the straw man probably goes back to the first argument mankind ever had.

Eve: "Have some of this nice Apple, Adam."

Adam: "But God said we should not eat from the forbidden tree."

Eve: "Don't you like fruit Adam?"

Aristotle (384–322 BC) mentioned this type of informal fallacy in some of his writings but the earliest formal reference to the straw man was in 1520 by Martin Luther. He claimed that one of the criticisms against him was based on an argument he never actually made. He said "they set up a man of straw whom they may attack."

Any level of government should welcome, and in fact encourage, open debate about policies and decisions of that government. Public consultation with the broad community and interactions with decision makers are vital components of that.

There is as much an obligation on the public as there is on elected officials to ensure that debate around a topic is based on data and facts and that the real issue is at the heart of the debate rather than any

‘straw man’ arguments. You can easily see it when an argument sounds too simplistic or extreme to be true. “This government is encouraging corruption” or “this vote is a vote against transparency” are red flags to straw men.

If the public wants to effect any change in government policy, there is no point in defeating the straw man. Have a true and honest debate based on the data for the betterment of society.

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