

Metaphor

The Guardian newspaper ran the following article in October 2013:

The controversial badger cull in England has been branded a "farce" by opponents after ministers confirmed the marksmen have been forced to seek extensions in order to kill the minimum number required. Despite the government slashing by two-thirds in 12 months its estimate of the number of badgers in the Somerset cull zone, marksmen still failed to reach their target.

"The whole situation is a farce," said Gavin Grant, RSPCA chief executive. "They keep moving the goalposts on how many badgers exist and how many need to be killed but, whatever the figures, it is clear the system has failed."

The environment secretary, Owen Paterson, who argues the cull is an essential part of stemming the rise of tuberculosis in cattle, said: "I am not moving anything – the badgers are moving the goalposts. You are dealing with a wild animal, subject to the vagaries of weather, disease and breeding patterns."

Discussion points:

- 1 What did the Minister mean when he said, 'I am not moving anything - the badgers are moving the goalposts'?
- 2 Why did he use this metaphor?
- 3 Was this metaphor valid?
- 4 We sometimes talk about 'badgering' someone. What does this mean? Why might this metaphor have come about?
- 5 Devise a metaphor that uses badgers.

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Discussion points:

1 What did the Minister mean when he said, 'I am not moving anything - the badgers are moving the goalposts'?

Teachers' notes:

- Paterson was trying to assert that badgers are changing the government target figures by changing their population numbers.
- This is clearly a nonsense statement from the Minister; badgers aren't aware of government actions, badger population numbers and don't strategise in this way.

2 Why did he use this metaphor?

Teachers' notes:

- The government had made estimates of the badger population in counties that were due to begin culling. It then set targets for the number of badgers to be killed based on these initial population estimates, Targets for kills were expressed both as a number of animals and as a percentage of the population in an area. It was found that these targets hadn't been met by the cull operatives in various counties. This suggested the government policy to cull badgers was failing. To make it appear as if cull contractors had reached the required percentage of kills, Paterson decided to reduce retrospectively the initial estimate of badger populations in the cull areas. He didn't want to admit that his policy was failing, nor that he didn't know how many badgers live in an area, so he tried to put the blame on the badgers, as if they were in some way implicated in subverting the government's policy and causing it to fail.
- Paterson would have been happy to see the badger characterised as in some way a devious animal, the enemy of human policies.

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3 Was this metaphor valid?

Teachers' notes:

- See comments above.

4 We sometimes talk about 'badgering' someone. What does this mean? Why might this metaphor have come about?

Teachers' notes:

- Badgering means to 'pester' or 'harass'. Etymologists believe the verb derives from the treatment of badgers by dogs during baiting events.

5 Devise a metaphor that uses badgers.

Teachers' notes:

- You might like to show your class some video clips to inform their understanding of badger behaviour:

<https://www.binfieldbadgers.org.uk/video-clips>