

Ask about English

Downing Street said



BBC WORLD SERVICE LEARNING ENGLISH



bbclearningenglish.com
© British Broadcasting Corporation 2005

BBC Learning English – Ask about English

A question from Paul in China:

Sometimes, I see news reports stating that "Downing Street said". I think that as Downing Street is a structure it cannot speak out itself. How can you explain this form of writing style?

Thank you for your help.

Sarah Bradshaw answers:

Downing Street is of course the home of the Prime Minister and it's used by journalists and others to mean a 'Downing Street spokesperson' or 'a representative of the British Government has said' or 'the British Government has expressed a view that...' But now we just use the address of the Prime Minister: 'Downing Street says' or 'Downing Street thinks that...' So it is a strange thing to think of a street speaking, but it's really talking about the British Government when you hear 'Downing Street'.

Other examples of (I think we'd say) institutions in the United Kingdom where we use an address instead of a person to attribute speech to, would be, for example: 'Fleet Street thinks that...' And Fleet Street is traditionally the home of British newspapers, so when you hear the expression 'Fleet Street thinks that the economy might be in trouble', for example, it means that the journalists of the United Kingdom think something to be true.

Another example is Buckingham Palace, where the Queen lives: 'Buckingham Palace says that there will be a royal garden party next month', for example. Again, Buckingham Palace can't speak; it's a building. It means that the official representatives of Buckingham Palace have told us that there will be a garden party next month.

So when you hear an address used in this way it usually represents an official body of people in some way; the collective thought or represented words of a body of people.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer