

SAYING THE RIGHT THING: MODERN LANGUAGES AND AUSTRALIAN DIPLOMACY

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the Modern Language Teachers Association of Victoria, 2 July 1992, Melbourne.

I am afraid my presence here to address you on the theme of modern languages is pretty fraudulent. We had to choose, at my school, right back in 7th grade between studying Latin, French and German, and the Latin teacher, as I recollect, was a little younger and prettier than the others... Latin was a rigorous enough intellectual discipline and continuing it up to first year university did some useful things for my vocabulary and appreciation of language structure, but it didn't do much for my ability to communicate with anyone actually living.

I have regretted not mastering a modern language ever since. So have others - no more so than poor French citizens who had to put up, during my student travelling days in the 60s with "*Avez vous une chambre pour une nuit?*" and "*Ou est la gare?*", although I quickly discovered that the best technique was usually just to look helpless and say "*au secours*". (I first employed this technique after I had asked, I thought with impeccable pronunciation, where the railway station was, and was told "Vietnam".)

My proudest moment with the French language came after a dinner speech at the Quai d'Orsay a couple of years ago when a French diplomat, having heard me make a passing reference to "*son et lumiere*", feigned amazement at my subsequent confession that that was just about as far as my French linguistic talents ran. And since in fact, that it just about as far as they do run, I had better turn to the substance of my address.

To a great extent, diplomacy is the art of language; of avoiding the type of misunderstanding I mentioned a moment ago, but on an international or global scale. The measure of whether we are successful at it - of whether we have found common understanding - can be dramatic and far-reaching. International peace, a fair and equitable trading environment, and a host of other fundamental issues often turn on finding the right language to convince others of the merit of particular policy or action.

The search for a universal language which could unite the world is not, of course a new one. It had a special flowering over a century ago when, in 1877, Dr Zamenhof launched Esperanto, which is still the most popular of the artificial languages. But despite the efforts of enthusiasts - like the Whitlam Government Minister who was thought by his colleagues to be talking in that language most of the time! - neither Esperanto, nor any

other of the man-made hybrids, have real roots in any community. They remain a somewhat stilted monument to late Victorian scientific rationalism.

English has an obvious, and ever growing, claim these days to be regarded as the language of international discourse (a trend for which I have been inordinately grateful). But the five other official languages of the UN - Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Spanish and French - show no sign whatever of fading gracefully from the scene. Moreover, interpreting for governments and the private sector has become a big business, with more and more interpreter schools and companies being set up around the world. None of this supports any argument that we are on the brink of a universal language.

Interpreters, of course, can't always be expected to get the nuances exactly right, especially when confronted with the kind of idiomatic expressions for which Australians are especially notorious. Someone who often created a little consternation in this respect was our former Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, no more so than on one famous occasion a few years ago in Japan. Waxing eloquent on the subject of Australia's industrial relations reform, he said at one point:

We're just not interested in playing silly buggers on this issue...

A few seconds later there was a rustle of head shaking and general bemusement evident all round the hall when the translation came through on the head phones. It soon transpired why. The translator - acting on the principle when in doubt, keep it literal - had rendered this as:

We're just not interested in acting as laughing homosexuals...

Australian English is, of course, our national *lingua franca*. But Australia's cultural vitality is also the product of other languages spoken in our community. These include the indigenous languages of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander citizens as well as European and, increasingly, Asian languages. Proficiency in the English language is obviously necessary for an individual to participate as fully as possible in Australian society. But as important as proficiency in English is for us as Australians, we also need to increase our strength in languages other than English in order both to enrich the intellectual and cultural vitality of our population, and to help secure our future economic well-being.

Our search to make Australian exports more internationally competitive, or to ensure that other national interests are properly protected, depends heavily on such factors as knowing languages to maintain a competitive edge. The fact of the matter is that in doing business - whether commercial or official - we cannot and should not assume that the people with whom we are dealing speak English fluently. Much less should we assume that they are

really comfortable in doing business in any but their own language. Our ability to speak that language can be so much more effective than the use of an interpreter to convey mood, personality, warmth, and above all a sense of personal interest in the affairs of the country involved.

It can be important, however, when we use a foreign language, to get it more or less right. The former Leader of the Opposition, Billy Snedden, found that to his cost on one famous occasion some years ago when he tried out his Italian - on which, as a former immigration official in Rome, he much prided himself - at a Melbourne Italian family rally. Within moments of his opening, uproar broke out, with red-faced gentlemen shaking their fists and hurling imprecations. His intentions has been admirable enough. He though he had been saying:

How nice it is to see this sea of bright shiny faces before me today...

But he hadn't, unhappily, got it quite right. What he actually said was:

My goodness, you peasants certainly scrub up well after a bath...

Communicating interest in another country and its people through effective use of its language should also, I believe, help dispel some misconceptions about Australia. There is no doubt that in the conduct of its relations with other countries, and particularly those in the Asia Pacific region, Australia still carries some baggage from the past. Stereotyped images die hard. This is true whether they are negative (an immigration policy tainted with racism: a one dimensional economy; a lazy workforce; an ignorant and patronising approach to non-Europeans) or merely vacuous (open spaces; exotic animals; tennis and surf). But there are plenty of positives on which to build. For a start, Australia has, to put it objectively, a more open and tolerant society than just about any in Asia. That is clearly reflected in our immigration policy where between a third and a half of our annual migrant intake (amounting in recent years to some 40,000 - 50,000 people each year) has since the late 1970s been Asian; and where our per capita absorption of Indochinese refugees, in particular, has been higher than that of any other country in the world. There are presently over 600,000 people of Asian descent living in Australia. This represents about 3.5 per cent of the population, but the figure is expected to rise to 7 per cent by the year 2010.

Furthermore, while older generations of Australians were less knowledgeable about Asia and Asians than they might have been, and some wartime prejudices have been slow to evaporate, a major effort is being made to systematically educate current and future generations of young Australians about the region in which they live.

Any strategy which seeks to increase the study of languages - be it at a national level or in a Department such as my own - must strike a balance between the diversity of languages

which could be taught, and the limits of resources that are available. Australia's location in the Asia Pacific region and our patterns of overseas trade should, to my mind, be a major factor in any selection priorities.

Australia has in fact arrived at a decisive point in its language history. We have become more aware of the importance of both language and literacy issues over the past decade and the Federal Government has, during that period, sought to strengthen the underlying philosophy of the language and literacy policy. The National Policy on Languages - first adopted in 1987, and most recently articulated in the August 1991 DEET paper "Australia's Language: the Australian Language and Literacy Policy" -has been a major development in this regard.

The need for such a policy was emphasised by the dramatic decline in the level of languages study in Australia over the past 25 years. In the 1960s, about 40 per cent of final year students studied a language other than English. Today, fewer than 12 per cent of Year 12 students do so, and amongst those, many are in any case native speakers of the language concerned. Fewer than one per cent of all higher education students in the whole of Australia complete a language unit at any stage of their course.

The choice of a language to study is also very uneven among students. For example, in Year 12 throughout Australia, 24 per cent of students study French while only 6 per cent study Malay or Indonesian. Of the students enrolled in modern language courses in institutes of higher education, over half are studying French or Japanese, while the remainder are studying any one of over 28 languages, often in very small numbers.

But things are changing. The Government is currently aiming, through its National Policy on Languages, to increase the proportion of Year 12 students studying a language other than English to 25 per cent nationally by the year 2000. In seeking to meet this target, the government has given special encouragement to the development of national curriculum material in six Asian languages of major importance to Australia (Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian).

As you would be aware, some languages relevant to Australia's place in the world are at present not widely taught because of the lack of teaching materials and appropriately qualified teaching staff. Work to remedy this situation has already begun, but it will need to be sustained. Asian studies and Asian languages, for example, have benefited to the tune of over \$5 million since 1990 from the National Priority (Reserve) Funds; and funding for the Government's Ethnic School Program increased by 30 per cent to \$9.4 million the financial year just ended.

Immigration and education policy, as I have outlined them, are just two of the ways in which Australia has been establishing a new set of credentials for itself as a constructive

participant in regional affairs. In practice, moreover, they show Australia to be ahead of the field in reaching for the Asia consciousness that is the precondition for an Asian community.

We are at the same time engaged in a wider set of complementary actions, referred to in the Prime Minister's One Nation package, aimed at taking full advantage of the enormous and historic opportunities that current rates of economic growth in Asia offer us. The Asia Pacific region includes some of the most economically dynamic economies in the world and has become the centre of world production. About half our trade is with the western Pacific nations alone. The approach we are taking in pursuit of the Prime Minister's call is an integrated one. It is based on a recognition that Australia's multilateral, regional and bilateral strategies and activities must be mutually supportive.

APEC - Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation - has been a major Australian policy vehicle through which our increasing engagement with the region has been projected. It also, incidentally, provides an interesting example of the direct links that language can play in reaching consensus. Australia proposed, at APEC's inception in 1989, that the three Chinese economies - China, Taiwan and Hong Kong - be included in APEC's membership. Failure to include these huge economies over time would detract from APEC's viability.

However, as you might imagine, the usual difficulties arose over how Taiwan should be designated. In the International Olympic Committee, for example, Taiwan is called "Chinese Taipei", while in the Asian Development Bank it is called "Taipei China". In the case of APEC, the formula finally agreed upon was that of the IOC, namely "Chinese Taipei". Perhaps of more interest to you, however, is the fact that while the English translation is the same, the Chinese characters used by the People's Republic of China to translate this term are different from those used by Taiwan. In the first case, they signify that Taiwan is Chinese in the political sense, and in the second, that Taiwan is culturally Chinese!

These sort of distinctions delight the aficionados and confuse the public. But they can have real importance in the world of international affairs. The fact is that, with such an arrangement, APEC has become the first body in which Chinese and Taiwanese Ministers, using their Ministerial titles, can actually sit down at the same table together. As such, it represents a significant breakthrough in relations between China and Taiwan.

A legitimate question is, however, whether we in Australia are adequately prepared to meet the challenges inherent in the greater regional integration which we ourselves have been advocating. Since I took up this job, I have been preaching the need for our trade and foreign policy to combine intelligent analysis and anticipation of events with an innovative approach combining various disciplines. The 1990 report to the Australian

Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education on the relationship between International Trade and Linguistic Competence indicated how far those involved in Australia's export trade fell short in the regard.

I believe that it is essential that our international business education be improved, particularly that our young business people learn about the joys of exporting goods and services rather than thinking of overseas as a sort of holiday that one takes from the serious business of the domestic market.

A number of institutes of higher education, including Monash University and Swinburne College here in Melbourne, have already launched undergraduate programs in international business relations. This is a welcome development. The courses cover various disciplines and encourage an outward orientation with particular focus on our own region. I am encouraged in particular by the emphasis in the various courses on the languages, customs and practices of Asian economies and societies. Above all, they will produce qualified business people with the sorts of skills that organisations and companies will need to expand their activities and effectively compete in our fastest growing markets.

Naturally, education does not halt at the campus gates. The Government recognises that skills can be effectively augmented by on-the-ground training in language and local culture. So we are encouraging the development of these skills through the Asia-Pacific Business fellowship Scheme which former Prime Minister Hawke announced in the Industry Statement of 12 March 1991. This initiative is a partnership with business. It will encourage Australian companies to develop international commercial and linguistic skills in their staff, particularly in relation to the Asia Pacific region. Successful candidates, with the sponsorship of their employing company, will live and work in a designated country while concentrating on developing those skills. It is Australia as a whole, and not just the students or their eventual employers, that will be the beneficiary of courses and programs such as these.

I have spent some time in dealing with the links between language and trade. Lest it be thought that I am practising what I preach in only one element of my portfolio, I would like to refer to the general approach taken to language training in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as a whole.

The major function of any Department of Foreign Affairs - indeed of diplomacy itself - is to project and protect a nation's interests abroad. A government's development of policies is based to a large extent on perceptions about a national ethos or identity which are in turn explored, expressed and enlivened through language. The logical conclusion of this applies to my own Department: to understand and influence the countries with which Australia has substantial relations, we must have a pool of officials with a good knowledge of the relevant languages. Such an ability will give our representatives

enhanced credibility and acceptance in the eyes of host authorities, and should thus better equip them to communicate Australian views and policies and possibly influence those of other governments.

We have found from practical experience that officials with language skills can understand more reliably and quickly the cultural and political psychology of the environment in which they are working. Inadequate language resources do not merely reduce the capacity of our diplomatic missions to function effectively. When a post has to use, though lack of sufficient Australian linguists, locally engaged interpreters in sensitive discussions - and this has happened from time to time - there is a very real risk that Australian interests will not be protected to the extent they should be.

A number of languages have been given top priority by my Department. These include Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian (including Malay) and Arabic. But there are a number of others which are also important to furthering Australia's diplomatic and commercial interests. These include some of the more "traditional" European languages, such as French, German, Russian and Spanish and extending now to languages such as Thai, Vietnamese, Korean and Pidgin. The reason for the Asian focus should, of course, be clear from what I have already said about the Government's policy of seeking closer cooperation with the countries of the Asia Pacific region. The question arises, however, of striking a balance between training officers in the languages of countries of greatest importance to Australian interests, and the need to maintain a level of expertise in the language of other countries which nevertheless remain important to Australia.

In 1991-92, the Budget for language training in my Department was \$1.1 million and will rise to \$1.2 million this Financial Year. This figure does not include the salary and allowances and the accommodation costs of officers undergoing the language training. It compares favourably with the language training outlays of the U.S. and British foreign services. I fully support such expenditure. The fact is that in foreign, as well as economic and trade policy, we are confronting a radically changed world, one that demands new skills and new perceptions. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union has underlined the extent to which the ideological divide between East and West, once the organising principle of international relations, has disappeared.

These changes are already producing a world where the competition for markets, capital and influence is more intense. But rather than close our eyes to competition, which is what we did in the past, we should prepare ourselves for it. Those who understand and are properly equipped are likely to benefit. The converse of this is also true. We can expect the ill-equipped to find increasing difficulty in coping with the more intense and widespread competition that will be a feature of the new world order, and of the international trading system in particular.

The more we get to know other languages and cultures, the closer we come to common understanding, with a consequent hope that the many problems besetting the international community may become just that much easier to resolve. Your role as modern language teachers has a significance extending way beyond the schoolroom. To get children interested in other languages, excited by them, and stimulated by the experience enough to want to go on to develop and extend their proficiency, is to perform a role that really will help this world of ours become a better and safer place in which to live.

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