

FRENCHSHIP WEEKS

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, to launch "The Francophone Fortnight", Canberra, 16 May 1991.

I am afraid my presence here to launch a program around the theme "La Francophonie Vous Parle" is nothing short of fraudulent. Vous might parle French, but I'm afraid je don't! We had to choose, at my school right back in 7th grade, between Latin, French and German, and the Latin teacher, as I recollect, was a little younger and prettier than the others ... I have been regretting the absence ever since - but no more so than those 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 have to say I quickly discovered that the best technique was usually to just look helpless and say "au secours"! (I first employed this technique when I 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, 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. So I won't burden you with any further attempt to communicate today in that mother tongue which most of you here rightly hold so dear.

This fortnight of focus on French as a medium of communication will be a useful reminder of just how important French is in the modern world, and indeed of how important French is to Australia. Depending on the definition you use, 42 countries, with a combined population of 500 million people, use French as their official language, or accord it a special status. That very impressive number includes nine countries with diplomatic representation in Canberra. The geographic dispersal of those nine countries gives a clear idea of the breadth of la francophonie - from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, to Vietnam and Laos in Asia, Canada in North America, Egypt and Lebanon in the Middle East, and in Europe, Switzerland, Belgium and France itself.

Those statistics highlight the important, but occasionally overlooked, fact that it is not only because the French language is the vehicle for the "mission civilisatrice" of French culture that makes it important: French is important in very practical and rather more mundane ways. It is a significant language of politics in our own Asia Pacific region, and a central language of science and technology, and of commerce - whose importance can only grow as movement towards the European single market in 1992 offers those businesspeople with the right language skills and the right contacts the prospect of access to the largest market in the world.

It was those hard-nosed factors which were behind the inclusion of French as one of the nine priority languages in the national languages policy announced in 1987. And it was an attempt to place the teaching of French in Australia in that utilitarian context which inspired the excellent and stimulating book entitled French in Australia: New Prospects, written by Joseph Lo Bianco, Director of the National Languages Institute, and Alain Monteil of the French Embassy. The book is into its second edition and I can recommend it to all of you who might be interested in a lively and informative account of the relevance of French, and its role in Australian education.

But just as it is clearly true that man shall not live by bread alone, so it is true of languages that for a student to learn, he or she must be convinced not only that the language is relevant, but that it is the expression of a strong cultural tradition. One of the exhibitions on display here - English and French: Languages of Liberty - reminds us that the political texts of both languages are a proud inheritance, steps along the way of our parallel political evolution, in which there has been an enormous amount of cross fertilisation of ideas between anglophone and francophone philosophers and political theorists.

Both languages sprang from vigorous, outward-looking and colonising civilisations, and as a result, both now form the linguistic basis of a large and diverse commonwealth of nations embracing widely different cultural, ethnic and

religious groups. In a sense, the languages which were formerly instruments of subjugation and colonisation have reversed their role, and now help bridge the divide between the countries of the North and those of the South, facilitating dialogue and cooperation between countries of vastly different political and economic systems.

The very institutional structures which have been established to channel this dialogue and cooperation have a close similarity - the Commonwealth Secretariat on the one hand, and the Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique on the other. And I understand that the same vigorous egalitarian assertiveness prevails in the Agence as in the Commonwealth, with the erstwhile colonies and territories taking their independence at its full measure and offering no undue filial deference to Britain or to France. You would not expect me, as the Foreign Minister of Australia, to view that as anything other than absolutely normal and indeed highly desirable.

One of the virtues of the book *French in Australia* is the enormous number of useful quotes it has unearthed. One that sticks in my mind is the comment that "the English language has been said to be French badly pronounced", which points to the vibrant interaction between the vocabularies of our two languages ever since William the Conqueror's tour de force in 1066. That interaction was presumably given absolutely no encouragement by the traditionally dismissive English attitude expressed in the famous headline, I believe of the *London Times*, "Storm closes channel, continent isolated". Nor would the *Academie Francaise*, a relentless extirpator of contamination, be greatly impressed by some of the words finding their way into the language of Racine and Moliere. But neither Racine nor Moliere had to handle the pressures of modern life, such as le stress of lining up une babysitter during le weekend in order to go out for un hamburger or un bifsteak at le self-service.

On the whole, I believe that sort of intermingling to be innocuous enough, and I suppose we have to reconcile ourselves to the universality of some of the less glorious phenomena of the late Twentieth Century, such as le fast food. But I'm sure it is not the pedant in me that yearns for the linguistic borrowings to be at least roughly appropriate to the purpose they wish to serve. It is peculiar, to say the least, that the *Australian Ballet* launched its 1990 advertising campaign with the slogan "Pas d'Excellence", so proclaiming not a new dance step, but an utter lack of the very quality that might attract a discerning audience. Or the menswear shop in Melbourne, *L'Homme*, which advertised its annual sale with the words "L'Homme Sale" and wondered why it attracted an exclusive if small clientele of cultured bikies.

Although this sort of double entendre might be more accurately described as a faux pas, it does show that French has a particular appeal at a variety of levels in Australia. It also shows, quite graphically, that although French remains the most widely taught second language in Australian schools and universities, there is still substantial room for improvement in our use of the language, and a large and useful place for a series of events such as that planned for "La Francophonie Vous Parle". I would like therefore to conclude by thanking the nine diplomatic missions of la francophonie for their initiative, and to congratulate the organisers for their flair and hard work in putting together a series of exhibitions and events which will underline the importance to the world and to Australia of one of humanity's great languages.

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