

OPINION

Let's send a message to the world ... in their languages

John Hajek and Yvette Slaughter May 5, 2008

THERE has been much discussion recently about language issues in Australian media, revolving around two closely intertwined areas: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's public speaking of Chinese and anxiety about Australia's language capacity.

As for the first, it's a highly commendable public act. It has generated real interest here and overseas, and reignited debate about the state of languages in Australia and in our schools in particular.

It takes real courage for an Australian politician to speak anything other than English. Despite the snide comments from some quarters, it also sends a powerful message to students and voters that it is perfectly all right to be a multilingual Australian.

Of course, Rudd's not the first multilingual prime minister in an English-speaking country — they are the norm in Canada, and former British PM Tony Blair spoke French publicly — but it has taken a long time for anything like this to occur in Australia.

As for our language skills in general, the signs are worrying. The proportion of students completing language study in schools has dropped from 40% in the 1960s to about 13% today. It is the reverse of what is happening elsewhere in the world. Our international competitors are getting better at speaking other people's languages, especially English. The fall in the number of Australian students studying Asian languages was identified as a major national problem at the 2020 Summit.

Fortunately, the Federal Government is already on the ball, which is no surprise given the Prime Minister's special interest. During the election campaign, Rudd announced the ALP's new National Asian Language and Studies in Schools Program, under which it would provide \$68.6 million over four years. It is remarkably like the earlier National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Program that the Howard government terminated at the end of 2002.

It is admirable that the Government is prepared to put more into languages and Asian studies in Australia. But this revived policy, and indeed the current debate on Australia's language skills (or lack thereof), seems to address only part of the equation. The Government's silence on European languages is deafening. It is far too focused on Asia and the policy sends several wrong signals.

First, it suggests Australia need only engage with some of its nearest Asian neighbours. But it is a globalised world and Australia needs to engage with every country on every continent, including Europe and South America. More of us need to be speaking more languages.

It is an entirely plausible outcome. Eurobarometer language surveys for EU countries show astonishing levels of multilingualism — that's right, people speaking three or

four languages, not just two, in extremely wealthy countries. The EU says European citizens should be expected to speak at least their mother tongue and two other languages. Why can't we do the same and do it well? That could be one Asian and one European language if students wish. It would be a strategic outcome for Australia.

Second, some languages, such as Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean, are portrayed as implicitly better than others since only these receive the special funding. This approach won't necessarily get more children to learn a language, but it will get schools to shift to the lucky four because that's where the money is - (temporarily).

We have seen these linguistic musical chairs before and schools have been burnt by it. Our research shows that many schools that responded by replacing European languages with Asian languages were left holding the baby when special funding ended. They have since dropped languages and they won't be going there again.

What's the solution? We need clear, uniform and well-funded federal and state language policies that allow our children proper access to a range of Asian and European languages. Diversity is the key. After all, Australia is already a multilingual nation, with 28% of Melburnians speaking a language other than English at home. Why not build on that? Furthermore, the current \$68 million over four years is a drop in the ocean.

We also need to see how and why countries such as Finland and Luxembourg are so successful in language teaching. There seems to be no crowded curriculum there and they do well in literacy and numeracy.

In addition to funding, attitude is critical. In these countries, languages are highly valued as an essential part of education, as basic as maths and English by governments, educators, parents and students. We need to do the same.

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