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commentaries

Languishing Languages — John Gatt-Rutter, Colin Mercer

Joseph Lo Bianco *National Policy on Languages*. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987, 283pp. (including appendices), \$A29.95.

Where is it that languages are dying off at the rate of one a year? Australia is one such place, Aboriginal languages are the victims, and this is one issue among many pinpointed in this important policy document.

Joseph Lo Bianco, a Special Commissioner at the Federal Department of Education was asked to draw up the *National Policy on Languages* in 1986 by the Minister for Education at that time, Senator Susan Ryan. This, in turn, was a result of the deliberations of the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts which, in 1984, identified the need for a policy analysis of language issues in Australia. The outcome of Lo Bianco's work is a detailed analysis and set of policy proposals which are theoretically informed and achieve an appropriate - if sometimes faltering - balance of pragmatism and longer-term objectives. The key area in which, perhaps not surprisingly, given the nature of the problem, the *National Policy* falters, is that of *trans-generational language maintenance*. We will be dealing with this in more detail below. For the present, however, some indication of the extent and ambit of the *National Policy* is necessary.

The Report is comprehensive in its coverage of the language issues which confront Australia - issues which apart from large or small local differences, increasingly affect most countries in the modern world, but which assume distinctive configurations in post-colonial or 'post-settler' societies with indigenous peoples. Plainly, personal mobility, large-scale labour migration, and linguistic intermixing, with resulting complexities in educational and social policy regarding language, have become world wide phenomena - in Sweden as in Argentina, in the USSR as in Nigeria. In Australia the Report is published in the politically charged context of a debate on the nature, objectives and, indeed existence of multiculturalism. Clearly attuned to these debates and their implications, Joseph Lo Bianco is careful to establish appropriate connections between the technical and policy-oriented aspects of varying types of language provision and the areas

of social and cultural *identity*. Given that this area can be one of intractable confusion and hostility over what defines a 'culture' or an 'identity' and the relationship between dominant, subordinate and residual cultures and identities, the *National Policy* treads warily but steadily. It is clearly conscious of its status as an *enabling* rather than *prescriptive* document. Foremost among the issues raised in the Report, and central to its thrust, is the need for language *awareness*: in the sense of a positive appreciation and understanding of language diversity. This includes the recognition of the diversity of language worlds and the perception of the needs of speakers of different languages and language varieties as matters of social equity. It also registers the fact that language diversity is itself a potential resource for speakers of *all* languages. The Report clearly shows that such language awareness is none too widespread in Australia, despite the multiplicity of languages - from Assyrian to Ukrainian, from Vietnamese to Maltese, not to mention the hundred-odd fast-disappearing Aboriginal languages - which are spoken here.

The relationship between language diversity and social equity is, however, a complex one and some definition of terms and relationships will undoubtedly be necessary in the wake of this Report and in the context of the multiculturalism debate. Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya, former Chairperson of the National Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Multicultural Education has begun this process by arguing, following the publication of the *National Policy*, that what matters in a multicultural strategy, linguistic or otherwise, is not - or not just - the elaboration and consolidation of linguistic and cultural identities conceived as quasi-autonomous realms of 'belonging' but rather strategies for the *empowerment* of those communities in mainstream political and social spheres. He argues for a much more dynamic and *relational* approach to multiculturalism; for an emphasis, that is, on relations between dominant and subordinate cultures of varying types rather than on simply consolidating discrete cultural identities. Multiculturalism and language policy, he suggests, can do without Herder, Romanticism and their inheritors (Jayasuriya, 1988). To borrow a term from Marxist political theory, one might suggest that the preferred model here is one of *hegemony* rather than of simple dominance and resistance. In the latter model the preferred strategy is to put up defensive barricades around your cultural enclave, to secure your social and cultural identity as a bastion which is resistant to and maintains its integrity in face of the incursions of a dominant culture. In the former model the issue is how to maintain elements of cultural and linguistic identity and *at the same time* develop mechanisms for negotiating forms of improvement, access and participation to secure a foothold in *and change the nature and power relations* of mainstream political and cultural life. The key issue, in language policy terms, is how to think the relationship between community languages and an official and dominant language not in terms of 'preferences' but alongside an appropriately re-worked concept of *citizenship*. We return to these issues below.

This policy document is first and foremost an educational instrument. It is

directed towards 'raising consciousness' about language issues, and informing discussion, among all those who make or influence policy: politicians and administrators at many levels and in many sectors, headmasters and social workers, police and parents of school-bound children, those in business and industry, ethnic community leaders and media people. This is in keeping with the complex pluralism of a country where a national policy cannot be imposed on the constituent States of the federation, nor even on individual schools (beyond certain limits), but can only be promoted. Hence, the rather tentative final sentence of the Foreword by Senator Ryan: 'It is now up to governments, agencies and individuals to consider what route they can best follow towards the goals that [Lo Bianco] has illuminated for us.'

Australia is spared one of the major language issues, perhaps the most intractable of all: it has no large blocs of competing languages, each with its own solid territorial or demographic base, to compare, for example with the case of English and French in Canada or Flemish and French in Belgium. Aboriginal and other minority languages are widely scattered. The largest minority group - the Italian speakers - amounts to only around five per cent of the whole population, and native speakers of English account for a good three-quarters of all Australians.

All the other sociolinguistic factors are here, however, compounded by that salient feature of Australian life, the 'tyranny of distance'. Joseph Lo Bianco's Report documents them all with maps, figures, tables, case-studies, quotations from the literature, bibliography and State-based appendices. These issues include: the incomplete policy shift from Anglophone assimilationism to multiculturalism; the superiority of bilingual over (English) monolingual education for Aboriginal children (though the same case can and should be made with regard to non-English mother-tongue children in ethnic communities); language maintenance for speakers of languages other than English, in the form of at least token education in the language and culture of origin for the children, and language resources and services for adults and the elderly including translating and interpreting service. Also addressed or proposed are: the provision of English for all and the acceptance of all the various local and social varieties of English spoken in Australia; a second language for all and instruction in languages of wider use, including those needed to pursue Australia's trading and geo-political interests ('geo-political languages'); and support for those with language disabilities.

This is an exemplary agenda, and represents a social-democratic confidence in setting up large scale policy ambitions and the ongoing agenda of the search for an appropriate 'national identity'. 'Restructuring' and 'reconstructing' are key words in the discourse being applied, respectively, to the economy, the education system and, with less success, the Constitution. Like these other initiatives the *National Policy on Languages* rides the two horses of equity and efficacy in a way that sometimes suggests the two names denote one horse. This is an unspoken element in the discourse. Bilingual education for Aborigines - as against

education through the English language alone - is recommended because it enhances the child's cognitive development and hence the child's advancement within the broader society, access to that society's systems of experience, rewards and power. This is both equitable sharing, and efficacious mobilization of Australia's population resources (including the skills specific to many Aboriginal people). The hidden problem here and one which will demand a good deal of policy-oriented thinking is expressed in the title of a book which is familiar to every sociolinguist: what Nancy Dorian, in a book which is the obituary of a Scottish Gaelic dialect, calls, 'the role of the semi-speaker in language death' (Dorian, 1980). Equity and efficacy are defined - irresistibly, no doubt - from the centre of the power that offers itself for sharing. How, then, to recognise the *Realpolitik* of an official national language and at the same time set up mechanisms for halting what might appear to be an inevitable process of language shift?

The theme of language maintenance (which stands in a highly problematical relationship with that of bilingual education) confronts similar problems. Individuals function best in their native language environment. Support for the elderly, hospital and legal services, public administration - all these are more efficacious if administered, as appropriate, in the citizen's native language. This theme runs through the Report wherever it discusses minority languages. The emphasis in the Report is, however, 'synchronic' rather than 'diachronic' and hence the lacunae around the issue of transgenerational language maintenance. Individuals are not stable social and cultural identities and while Non-English Speaking Background citizens and residents might welcome the provision of native-language services in the linguistically complex areas of health and social service provision and in filling out the sometimes formidably complex Federal ballot papers, for example, the accession to full rights of citizenship and potential empowerment will undoubtedly require training and facilities to simultaneously enter the 'official-national' domain of English.

This is very tricky ground because with monotonous regularity the advocates of 'language as patrimony' call for all Australians to learn English as another way of promoting a strategy of assimilation. Pledging an oath of obedience to the Queen on becoming a citizen is, however, quite a different thing to committing yourself to the *patrimony* of a culture of which she happens, contingently, to be an important icon. No doubt these same advocates have never tried to master a language other than their own. Anyone who has seriously attempted another language would know that years of language education in schools rarely produce even a bare practical competence in a foreign language. Even if an English language test were taken by the prospective immigrant at his or her point of origin, and passed, it would still be several years in most cases before that person felt at home in an English-language environment, and for many that day would never come. Mother-tongue provision, in some form, and a supportive mother-tongue language environment, are bound to be indispensable to the adequate social functioning of that individual as an individual and also as a citizen. Equity

and efficacy this time more exactly coincide, as the immigrant (unlike the Aborigine) has normally chosen to enter the host society - though possibly without having a clear idea of what society it is he or she has chosen, and without the host society having a clear idea of what choices he or she is making.

Clarity of such choices by both the individual and the host society and their implications is one of the objectives of the *National Policy*. It is in the area of language after all - as means of communication, as index of ethnicity, as a form of access to the mechanisms and relays of social, economic and cultural power - that such choices present themselves most insistently and repetitively on a daily basis. In such a context the easy coupling of equity and efficacy as homogeneous objectives needs much more painstaking re-thinking through the whole issue of the definition of citizenship as such. This is a major category of modern politics which is re-emerging as a concern of recent scholarship. From the moment, in 1794, when the Abbé Grégoire persuaded the revolutionary French National Assembly that a national language was a central principle of political unity - 'the unity of idiom is an integral part of the Revolution' - the relationship between language and citizenship has been an integral albeit sometimes forgotten component of modern forms of government. But, like so many other products of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, citizenship is not a universal and transhistorical category which can be applied unproblematically. This is especially the case in countries like Australia and Canada which have not developed along the normative lines of European national polities. In both of these countries the existence of indigenous populations has meant that the application of any universal and undifferentiated notion of citizenship could only be forced and regressive.

What countries like Australia and Canada with both indigenous and large migrant populations might be confronted with is the opportunity for a fundamental re-casting of the idea and operation of citizenship. The citizen will, necessarily, have to be a more 'fragmented' object than that of traditional political theory. Its 'home' is already more complex than that of the unitary nation-State in so far as its territory is much larger, operates as a Federation and is marked by regional and State loyalties and affiliations. It is no necessary threat to political sovereignty to suggest that a re-cast concept of citizenship might well build on both these 'natural' and historical diversities and enshrine them, along with associated rights and responsibilities, as its principle and condition of existence.

In so far as citizenship entails definite forms of legal recognition and politico-cultural empowerment, such a re-definition may well allow a different context in which to think of issues such as 'equity' and 'efficacy' in language policy. The limited logic which currently posits equity and efficacy as its twin ends, involves a limited logic in the allocation of means and resources. Mostly, this amounts to the enhancement or expansion of existing services: English instruction for migrants; government funded mother-tongue 'insertion' or out-of-hours classes in schools; increased provision of community language education at all levels; translating and interpreting services; more cultural education and more multicultural activities;

more books in more languages in public libraries. In many of these things Australia shows itself already a liberal, indeed a generous society. On some fronts, *Lo Bianco* goes beyond the existing array of instruments, as, for instance, in proposing the creating of Key Centres for certain kinds of professional language skills - some of which are already going ahead.

However, Australia's levels of attainment for languages other than English, still remain low and, in some areas, such as tertiary education, actually declining both in quantitative and in qualitative terms. Only a small percentage of the school population undertakes foreign language study, and the results are generally modest. In view of the nation's linguistic diversity, this may seem to be a paradoxical situation. The limited logic of equity and efficacy which we have referred to is itself inefficacious in resolving the issues it addresses because it fails to empower the very people it purports to be helping. By defining them in terms of disability, it disables them, denying them the very resources they carry with them - or at least a major one, their native tongue. In thus disabling people, this limited logic is a limiting logic, diminishing not only the subjects it serves (helps) but also the Subject it serves (obeys). In other words, if it accepts this logic, Australia will be redefining itself in terms of existing dominances, as tolerating subordinate groups however autonomously defined and establishing them in a 'comfortable' relationship to itself. There is a long way to go before Australia accepts a less limited and limiting logic of equity and efficacy: one which is no longer satisfied by easing entry into existing dominances, but which facilitates some form of entry to and re-negotiated positions in, a reorganised terrain of political, economic and cultural power relations. Language policy has a major role to play in convincing people in those places where it matters - schools especially - that multiculturalism is not a Romantic ideal of 'melting pots', 'mosaics' and 'rainbows' engendered by so many puffs of goodwill and *bonhomie*. It is a matter of hard policy options and rigorous forms of training. Political pluralism is hard work, needs lots of tedious committees, institutions, safeguards and laws; in short, far-sighted management and good administration. Linguistic pluralism and multiculturalism will require an equally effective infrastructure, especially if they are to be supported by a criterion of citizenship and are to support it in turn.

This is not easy, of course. The issue is not to imagine a situation in which it would be practical to have more than one official national language, English. What is at issue is how the dominance of English not as a medium of communication but as a *patrimony* can be limited in order to relax the very severe limits on other languages, cultures and ethnicities. This is doubly complicated by the status of vernacular Australian as somehow resistant to and dismissive of the full-vowel tones of the 'Queen's English', and by the fact that the defence of English as patrimony is so often pitched in this populist vernacular. So far, gestures towards remedying this situation have been permissive and tolerant, rather than genuinely enabling. Yet enabling solutions can at least be envisaged. Indeed, they are the *only* possible solutions to Australia's specific situation.

Instead of various forms of no doubt well-meaning tokenism, real mother-tongue education should be feasible, especially in areas where there are concentrations of speakers of a given minority language. In other words, a form of 'immersion' in the minority language both for members of that minority and for any others wishing to acquire that language. Only in this way can speech-communities be kept alive at the same time as allowing empowerment within the official domain. It is only living speech-communities along with appropriate resources, mechanisms and legal recognition that can provide the much-needed language skills - mother-tongue support for the elderly; cultural continuity and contact with the country of origin; language services in administration, health, law and social welfare; translating and interpreting services for international contacts in trade, politics, science, learning; interlingual knowledges of all sorts; a more than merely decorative and decaying spaghetti-and-balalaika multiculturalism. One of the effects of the consolidation of national languages in the European polities was the *folklorisation* of regional and indigenous dialects and patois; their fatal transformation into a picturesque museum-like status. From the language policy point of view, one of the advantages of predominantly migrant societies like Australia and Canada is that they are not necessarily burdened with the same historical inevitability; they start from a different position. The issue is to recognise this different position and set of possibilities. This brings us to the question of language maintenance in its 'diachronic' form.

National Policy on Languages does not consider *transgenerational* language maintenance, to reverse the seemingly irresistible and almost total 'language shift', by the third or fourth generation, of descendants of speakers of minority immigrant languages from the language of origin to the majority language, English. Yet the opportunity is there for the taking. There is no reason why, on balance, and given Australia's current but 'inactive' linguistic resources, well-planned mother-tongue education should cost more or be more difficult to mount than monolingual English-language medium education. Indeed, some teacher-training institutions are having significant successes in this area. In the middle to long term, in fact, there could be considerable gains in it. In view of the arguments advanced above, this is not an issue of 'language ghettos'. A ghetto in its customary contemporary usage is a place of disabling constriction and confinement, a place of deprivation, not a place which affords access to cultural enrichment and political liberty. Even the acquisition of English, along with general cognitive development, can be expected to improve within the framework and security of a mother-tongue school. Of course, such schools or programmes cannot be made to materialise by decree. Key factors have to be right, especially attitudes to languages(s) within the school community and its support mechanisms and organisations and, of course, in the provision and training of appropriate teaching personnel.

Admirable in intention and wide in its ambit, this policy document denies itself some of the means to achieve its designated aims in this area. The kinds of language skills and services that are needed cannot be adequately deployed in

the absence of fully functional, active speech-communities, producing *native speakers* of the required languages. This is where language policy is necessarily a part of education policy which in the current emphasis of 'skills formation' and equity might well look in coordinated rather than *ad hoc* ways to the ethnic communities as *providers* of necessary skills. Inadequate deployment of these resources will cost a lot of money. Money is conspicuously lacking to finance such far-reaching schemes. Economic failure will spell two-fold political failure. The ethnic minorities will see that their needs are not being met. The ethnic majority will complain about the expense. And Australia's language fortunes and language assets will go on languishing.

This is thus a hard and pragmatic matter of language economics - the relative costs and benefits of alternative language policies. There is no reason why, say, aged Lithuanians who need such facilities should not be looked after in Lithuanian homes for the aged. This requires that they have Lithuanian speakers to look after them. Lithuanian speakers are best produced in Lithuanian schools. The cost of a Lithuanian school need not be more than marginally greater than the cost of an English-language school. And so on. Nor will the Lithuanian children be less proficient in English than if they had gone to an all-English school - more likely, according to all relevant experience, the opposite should be the case. Things of this sort have been done. They are still being done, but in isolation, almost accidentally, or miraculously and not as a matter of policy. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian language - and all Australian languages other than English - are kept marginalised in their sub-standard ghettos, and more or less disabled. The resources and the opportunity are there. It would be a pity if they died a lingering death over the next generation or two on account of a failure of the imagination.

It is not the imagination of linguists - applied, socio or theoretical - which is an issue here, though professionals in these fields might more effectively exploit the opportunity which a national language policy offers for connecting research to policy options and stretch their imagination and capacities too. As we have suggested above, the consideration and implementation of a national language policy located, as it is, in the context of debates on multiculturalism, on the nature of an 'Australian identity', on the restructuring (and re-skilling) of the economy and its re-positioning within the Pacific Rim and, more recently, on the reorganisation of tertiary education, might well provide the opportunity for establishing a new agenda on the broader questions of citizenship and cultural rights with implications that go well beyond national frontiers. The buzz word, 'flexible specialisation' should apply to these resources as well. It is a *political* imagination which is mostly at stake here and it is to Joseph Lo Bianco's credit that he enables the connections to be made between what are customarily pigeon-holed as 'cultural' issues of *identity* and the more political and economic areas of access, participation and the allocation, organisation and empowerment of human resources. Whether or not these connections are consolidated in real terms is, as the Minister says, 'up to governments, agencies and individuals...'

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