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Author: Dónall Ó Riagáin

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Unions and Language: Irish in the European Union – A Personal Appraisal

Dónall Ó Riagáin

Unions – political unions – have not got a good track record when it comes to respecting language rights and linguistic diversity. When one people overrun another and set about ruling them they need to justify and rationalise their behaviour. One way of approaching the issue is to say that the language and culture of the dominant group are superior to those of the conquered peoples.

We have many examples from history. The Roman Empire immediately springs to mind. Those who did not submit to Rome and speak Latin were described as being barbarians and savages – inferior in every way to the Romans. The Greeks thought along the same lines. European powers that built up colonial empires – the Spaniards, the English and the French etc. – invariably imposed their language on the conquered peoples. In its final years as a colonial power, Portugal tried to create the myth that its colonies were in fact not colonies at all but overseas provinces of Portugal. And the criterion for according members of the local population civil and political rights was their ability to speak Portuguese. Those who could were classified as *assimilados*.

There were practical as well as ideological reasons also for imposing monolingualism – reasons of administrative efficiency and security. Sir John Davies, writing in 1612 of the Irish, provides us with an excellent example of this: 'We may conceive and hope that the next generation will in tongue and heart, and every way else, become English; so that there will be no difference or distinction but the Irish Sea betwixt us'.[1] The connection between tongue and heart is revealing.

It would be naïve to think that such attitudes belong to the past. It is instructive to have a look a the web-site of U.S. English, an organisation, claiming a membership of no less that 1.8 million, which is dedicated to promoting English as the sole official language in the United States.[2] Its founder, the late

[1] Extracts from Sir John Davies, *A Discovery of the True Causes why Ireland was never Entirely Subdued*, 1612, reprinted in Constantia Maxwell, *Irish History from Contemprorary Sources* (London, 1923), 351.

[2] On its website US English declares 'Declaring English the official language means that

Senator S. I. Hayakawa, once observed:

> The United States, a land of immigrants from every corner of the world, has been strengthened and unified because its newcomers have historically chosen ultimately to forgo their native language for the English language.[3]

Gaels from Scotland and Ireland will know of another famous person quoted on the U.S. English website – Margaret Thatcher: 'Why in the world anyone in America is allowing another language (other than English) to be his first. . . I don't know'.[4]

I can think of only two imperial powers that were reasonably tolerant from a linguistic perspective – the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. There was such linguistic diversity within these empires that it must have been evident that a monolingual policy just could not work. It is only fit to observe that they were very intolerant on other respects.

I The Irish Experience

Ireland has experience of two political unions – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (or Northern Ireland as it now is) and the European Union. The earliest precursor of today's European Union was the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951. It had six member-states: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The Community was the brainchild of Robert Schumann and Jean Monet who were convinced that the best way of avoiding another disastrous European war was to forge a community of interests between the main protagonists – France and Germany. And they believed that as coal and steel were highly important components in the economies of both, the most important countries, this was the basis on which to start. Six years later, two more communities were established with the Treaty of Rome – EURATOM, which dealt with nuclear energy, and the European Economic Community, the most important of all.

official government business at all levels must be conducted solely in English. This includes all public documents, records, legislation and regulations, as well as hearings, official cerimonies and public meetings. See http://www.us-english.org/ [accessed 1 September 2008]. ,

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

It is intriguing to note that linguistic and cultural issues did not form any part of the early vision. In fact, it appears that the intention back in 1951 was that the European Coal and Steel Community would have only one working language—French. Opposition to this proposal came, not from Germany, as might be expected, but from Flanders. Linguistic issues were high on the Belgian political agenda in the 1950s and the idea that French should become a privileged language in a Community whose headquarters were to be in bilingual Brussels was anathema to the Flemings. Dutch would have to be given equal status. The outcome was that the Community acquired four official and working languages: French, German, Dutch and Italian.

It is worth noting that there is nothing in either of the major European treaties—the Treaty Establishing the European Communities (which is the consolidated treaty drawing together the separate treaties for the Coal and Steel Community, Economic Community and EURATOM treaties and the Treaty establishing the European Union)—which mentions official and working languages. The final article of the European Community Treaty, Article 314, and the final article of the European Union Treaty, Article 53, simply list the languages in which there are official and authentic versions of the treaties. The issue of official and working languages is dealt with in Council Regulation No. 1/1958.

II Ireland joins the European Communities

This situation continued until the early 1970s when the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Ireland applied for membership. As it happened, the Norwegian people rejected European Community membership in two different referenda so Norwegian never became an official or working language. The United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined the European Communities in 1973 and English and Danish became official and working languages of the Communities. But what about Irish? Why was it not included? The simple, shameful answer is that Irish was excluded at the express request of the Irish government.

In the course of negotiations for membership, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Patrick Hillery TD, wrote a letter to the President of the European Communities on 23 July 1971 in which he said:

> Irish is the first official language of Ireland, this being provided for

in our Constitution. My government consider it to be a matter of the greatest importance that the primary position accorded in our Constitution to the Irish language should be reflected in a suitable and specific recognition to be incorporated in the agreed provisions for the languages of the enlarged Communities. Indeed, I can say that, having regard to the unique position of the Irish language in our national culture, both our parliament and people would expect that such recognition be given.

The government consider that this could most suitably be done by having Irish designated as an official language of the enlarged Communities. We fully realise that the official translation into Irish of all Community acts could give rise to serious difficulties of a practical nature. We would, therefore, propose that, while provision would be made of Irish as an official language, there should also be provision to limit the extent to which Irish translations of Community texts would have to be prepared.

What we have in mind here is there should be an authentic text of the accession treaty in the Irish language and that official texts in the Irish language of the existing treaties should also be prepared.

I consider that if arrangements on the lines which I have outlined were agreed, the position of the Irish language could be protected, national wishes and sensitivities would be respected and the creation of serious practical difficulties for the Community in the translation work would be avoided.[5]

III In the Wilderness

What the Irish government of the day seemingly did not understand that the European Community make no distinction between 'official languages' and 'working languages'. So, notwithstanding what the Irish government claimed in public, Irish for thirty-four years was neither an official nor a working language of the Communities. The term – a non-legal term it should be understood – used to describe it was 'treaty language'. Why did the Irish government take such a stance? One can only speculate. Plans were being made in 1973 to end the requirement that a knowledge of Irish be an essential prerequisite

[5] Quoted in Dónall Ó Riagáin, 'Acht Teanga don Ghaeilge', *Oghma*, 9 (1997).

for entering the civil or public service. (This happened in 1975.) Irish becoming a working language in the European Community could have stymied this. Some say that certain senior civil servants had their eyes set on positions in the European Community institutions. More than once, I heard a report of an internal civil service memo saying that 'Gaeilgeoirí types' (Irish-speaking types*)* would get all the top positions in the European Commission if Irish were a working language. A year ago, one of my post-graduate students was doing her thesis on Irish in the European Union. When she sought the relevant civil service files from that period under the Freedom of Information Act she was informed that the files regarding Irish had been misplaced and were not available.

IV The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages

I would now like to digress from the issue of the Irish language to the broader area of linguistic diversity and support for regional or minority languages. In the late 1970s a number of motions for resolution were tabled in the European Parliament concerning these languages and indeed the right of minorities in general. One of them was successful in attracting support—one on lesser-used languages, tabled by John Hume and supported by a Socialist MEP from each member-state. I had written a number of articles on the issue and it was suggested to me that I contact John Hume and Gaetano Arfé, who was charged with preparing a report for parliament. This I did and I can only say that this meeting was to change my life. I actively canvassed for support for the Arfé Resolution which was adopted by a comfortable majority in October 1981. The following year the European Community started a small budget line for minority languages and at a colloquy organised by Arfé and the Socialist group, the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages was established. I was elected its first President and two years later I was appointed Secretary General. The objective of the Bureau was to conserve and promote the autochthonous lesser-used languages of the European Communities together with their attendant cultures.

I do not wish to dwell on the history or work of the Bureau. Suffice it to say that we established committees in every member-state, lobbied for support for our languages on every occasion, had a number of additional resolutions on lesser-used languages passed by the European Parliament, persuaded the parliament to vote an increased budget line each year, set up programmes

(including a study-visit programme), published a newsletter, produced copious publications and videos, organised conferences, workshops, youth gatherings, public meetings etc., and cooperated with the Council of Europe in the preparation and adoption of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and with the OSCE High Commissioner in the preparation and adoption of the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities. It is only fair to say that successive Irish governments gave the Bureau financial and political support. We had Presidents and Directors from different language communities. One I fondly remember was Reverend Jack Macarthur, a Gàidhlig speaker, who served as Bureau President from 1987 until 1989.

I must say that there was a broad body of support in the European Community institutions for linguistic diversity and for our work. Opposition normally came, not from within, but from certain member-state governments, notably the Greek one.

The saga of the Bureau does not have a happy ending, I am sorry to say. The Directors of the Bureau moved the Secretariat General from Dublin to Brussels in 1998, closed the Dublin Office completely in 2001 and declared my Dublin-based colleagues and me redundant. Within eighteen months the organisation was in crisis. It now has no permanent office or staff and exists more in name than in reality.

V European Union Attitudes towards Linguistic Diversity

It must be said, however, that Bureau thinking seems to have left a lasting mark on European thinking and programmes. The European Union has now adopted, what was the Bureau's motto, 'Unity in Diversity'. Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted by European Union leaders in 2000, says that the Union shall respect linguistic diversity, and Article 21 prohibits discrimination based on a number of grounds, including language. Together with respect for the individual, openness towards other cultures, tolerance and acceptance of others, respect for linguistic diversity is a core value of the European Union. Its language programmes are now open to all languages, not just to the official and working ones as hitherto. There is now a Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban, a Romanian. The Union has twenty-three official and working languages, more than any other international institution that I know of. The UNO has only six and NATO two.

VI Status for Irish

In 2003 I was invited to give a paper on 'Linguistic and Cultural Rights in the New Europe' at a summer folk-school in the small Gaeltacht area of An Rinn. What I said aroused more interest than I had anticipated and I was invited to a meeting of interested people during the Oireachtas festival two months later to see if anything could be done to gain official and working status for Irish in the European Union. The European Union was about to extend membership to ten new member-states and recognise nine new official and working languages. Two of them, Estonian and Maltese had smaller pools of speakers than Irish. It was at this meeting in Tralee that Stádas was established, a small but representative pressure group whose sole objective was to obtain official European Union status for Irish. We elected as Chairperson Dr Pádraig Ó Laighin, an Irish speaker who had left a highly successful academic career in Canada to return to Ireland. Pádraig was an inspired choice—analytical, articulate, energetic and totally committed.

VII The Campaign

We prepared our mission statement and set out our arguments. Our first approach was to the National Forum of Europe, a broadly representative body established by the Irish government to allow interested persons and groups to learn about and discuss European matters. Our arguments were very well received and the Chairperson of the Forum, a former Northern Ireland Ombudsman, Michael Hayes, declared himself in favour of Irish being afforded official European Union status.

We then sought the support of local authorities, cultural and sporting organisations and finally the political parties. Fianna Fáil, the main government party, was and is generally considered by the public to be more favourably disposed towards Irish than the main opposition party, Fine Gael. But the government's negative attitude was the stumbling bock. We decided to focus on the opposition parties and get them onside. This we did with surprising ease. The main opposition parties, especially Labour, came on board. Motions were tabled in both the Seanad (Upper House) and the Dáil (Lower House). Meanwhile a young Finnish academic who had learned Irish, Panu Petteri Höglund, organised a signature campaign on the Internet. Over 80,000 signatures were collected. Street demonstrations took place, many of them led by students.

I confess that when I was invited to join Stádas I did so believing that we would probably not succeed but also believing that we should give it our best shot. I feared that in the era of the Celtic Tiger many people would regard the campaign as being an irrelevancy or unrealistic. I was wrong, completely wrong. Those who took to the streets, who collected signatures and packed the visitors gallery in the Dáil during the debate were not old war-horses like me: they were from the young, optimistic, self-confident young generation – the cubs of the Celtic Tiger.

A reluctant and, one felt, somewhat confused government finally capitulated to rising public opinion and agreed to act. We learned that a delegation was sent to Brussels to see if there was some way in which the status of Irish could be improved short of according the language official and working status. The legal services of the Commission clarified that there was not. The government then finally asked that Irish be made an official and working language of the European Union.

VIII A New Dawn

The Council of Ministers acceded to the Irish request and on 1 January 2007 Irish became the twenty-first official and working language of the Union. (Bulgarian and Romanian were later to join it.) It is the only Celtic language to gain this status. A derogation was granted under which only Regulations adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council need be translated into Irish. This derogation will be reviewed in four years time. I am happy to say that the European Union institutions have already translated other documents (e.g. websites, information materials) that they are not obliged to translate. Translators and interpreters are being recruited. Irish is now covered by IATE (Inter Active Translation for Europe), an online database of terminology found in official European Union documents.

IX The European Union and Respect for Diversity

One could level criticism against the European Union for its approach to language. Three languages – French, English and German – are used extensively for internal communication. Is the Union guilty of spreading linguistic imperialism? Before rushing to criticism one might ask if our languages would be

better off if the European Communities and Union had never come into existence. If the Union did not exist its role in promoting trade and creating an extended market would almost certainly have been assumed by a series of bilateral or multilateral trade agreements. And any such agreement would require the use of a language (or a small number of languages) for international communication. I have found no evidence that would lead me to believe that Irish would be better off or stronger under such circumstances. Perhaps many of the European Union's linguistic shortcomings will come be more effectively addressed if we focus on developing a global paradigm to accommodate linguistic diversity—one which ensures the use of all languages in their respective domains.

For me, as an Irish speaker, I feel we have come a long way from one union to another. My ancestors, as late as the final decades in the nineteenth century, were punished at school for speaking Irish. Last year my elder daughter, a lawyer in the European Court of Justice, took her pledge of loyalty to the Union in Irish. Irish is no longer the language of demoralised peasants: it is the language of a sovereign (and dare I say, prosperous) people in a united Europe. For me, as an Irish speaker, the European Union gets a good pass-mark and leaves me feeling enthusiastic about the new Europe and optimistic for the future of my language in it.