

Speaking in tongues

Roly Sussex

TWO-thirds of the world's population is bilingual or better: They can function in two or more languages. That's more than four billion people.

In many parts of Europe – excluding the English-speaking parts – it is not uncommon to find trilinguals in secretarial and clerical jobs: for unemployment you need, say, Dutch plus English plus another language.

Belgium has two official languages, French and Flemish, so Belgians tend to have both plus English. Switzerland has four – plus the ubiquitous English. South Africa has 11.

English is everywhere. It had unpromising beginnings, in a scruffy band of marauding thugs who crossed the Channel in the 5th century. The language of the Angles, Jutes and Saxons became English, which is the world language, at least for the time being.

Therein lies a great benefit, since we speak the dominant tongue. We make money teaching it to others.

But there is also a great danger: If you speak the world language, why learn another? Why not wait for others to talk English?

And yet Australia is hugely rich in languages. More than 200 languages are spoken here, including the 70 or so left of the 250 Aboriginal languages existing when Cook arrived. We are a gathering place of multilingual, multicultural people. And, by international indicators, a pretty successful place. In the 1980s we were a world leader. But no longer. We gravely undervalue our language treasures.

In Victoria fully 20.2 per cent of students take a second language in Year 12. The national average is 13.1 per cent. Queensland is last, with a shameful figure of 5.8 per cent. And that in spite of the efforts of some really fine language teachers in our schools.

The Goss government invested in new programs to promote second languages. Some exciting progress was made. But it faltered.

So what happened?

We lost the plot and dropped the ball. It's not wholly our fault: we were trying to build something big from a low starting base. The initiatives ran out of money, out of momentum and out of support.

The past decade has seen a real falling away. We didn't change the public perception about second languages.

Smart state? Not yet. You aren't smart if you can't communicate, and you can't communicate unless you can share languages with the people from other cultures, here or overseas. If they can speak our language, and we can't speak theirs, they have a huge communicating advantage.

If you don't believe me, read *Australia's Language Potential* by Michael Clyne (UNSW Press, 2005).

We need a public debate about second languages in Queensland (*).
Who's going to start?

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() ACSSO comment: Let us start the debate in Queensland by all means – but this is a debate that needs to be worked through in every state, territory and jurisdiction. As Dr Robert Scott said in a recent US State Department paper: “We have a critical national need to know other cultures and to be competent in communicating with other people. These are not new needs. We have heard many calls for action to address these needs. So it is past time for a renewed focus on our role as members of the national community. Last call – it is time for action!”*