

Launch of the National Languages Institute of Australia

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Hon. R. J. Hawke

Melbourne
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The worlds of economic, social, cultural and artistic knowledge are concealed by a door. The key to that door is language.

It is very apt that the National Gallery of Victoria, a major storehouse and showcase for our heritage and for our cultural achievements, should be the location for the launch of the National Languages Institute of Australia.

And it is gratifying to see the Government's commitment to language training complemented by the presence of such a large and diverse group of people today.

At the outset let me congratulate Joseph Lo Bianco on his appointment as Director of the Institute. As the author of the National Policy on Languages, which the Government has been implementing since 1987, Joe brings to the job a dedication and wealth of experience recognised nationally and, increasingly, internationally.

The National Policy on Languages provides a sound and far-sighted framework for the Institute's work.

Its four basic goals are:

- the ability of all Australians to speak and write English
- support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages
- the acquisition by all Australians of a

language other than English, and

- equitable and widespread language services.

One of Australia's great resources is the fact that - thanks to the accident of history that saw Captain Cook arrive on the east coast of our continent a few days ahead of La Perouse - we are part of the English-speaking world.

I don't seek to enter into any argument about the relative merits of Shakespeare and Milton over Racine and Voltaire. That would be interesting, but beside the point.

Less controversial and more relevant is the consequence of Captain Cook's speedier arrival.

For much of our subsequent history our British heritage, including having English as our first language, underpinned the access of Australian producers to the vast markets of the former British Empire.

Today, English is still the key to our trading links with the United Kingdom, the United States, and the wider English-speaking world. More than 30 per cent of our exports go to countries where English is the principal trading language; and such countries provide more than 40 per cent of our imports.

Even beyond the English-speaking world, English remains the most international of languages. It is truly one of the great global trading languages.

However the more recent internationalisation of trade and industry has left Australia with a major challenge: the need to improve the way we interact with markets where languages other than English are spoken.

In our international business dealings we have

too often been unprepared to venture into the unfamiliar territory of foreign languages and cultures. We haven't devoted the effort we perhaps should have to the mind-expanding and business-expanding education offered by new language skills.

With the inevitable emergence into the global economy of the countries that once formed a bloc of centrally planned nations - the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe - Australians will need to ensure we can compete in these new markets on their linguistic terms.

And new language skills are particularly important as we seek to enmesh ourselves in the dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region.

We earn an increasingly large part of our export dollar from countries that do not speak English as their first language - including, of course Japan, our major trading partner.

Increasingly, Australians are rising to the challenge. I was particularly pleased on my recent visit to Japan to tell my Japanese audiences this striking fact: Australia has more students per capita learning the Japanese language in primary, secondary and tertiary education than any other country outside Japan.

Do not assume from any of this, however, that my Government sees any value in the false distinction between 'trading languages' and 'community languages'.

When I launched the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in July 1989, I gave a commitment on the part of my Government to the languages and cultures of all Australians.

By building on the linguistic and cultural heritages of all communities within Australia, we can help to unlock barriers to equal participation and provide access to the diverse abilities and skills of our entire population.

Language can help us not only overcome barriers to trade; it can also help us improve our cultural understanding.

Let us never forget this basic fact. Thanks to our immigration policies - policies that have brought to our shores people from more than 130 nations - and thanks too to our deliberate adoption of policies that foster pride in our multicultural diversity, Australia is uniquely endowed with the riches of many languages.

We are a vast storehouse of knowledge, due to the diversity of languages spoken in the community and to our experience in the teaching of languages of national, international and social significance.

And we have built on that resource. We have led the world in the teaching of English as a second language and we have been far-sighted in recognising the advantages of a truly national language policy for social, economic and national purposes.

My Friends

Many countries in the world have an institute created by government to research and develop language issues.

Some are ancient academies devoted to the cultivation or purification of the national language. Others are charged with the responsibility for developing a national language to replace a language inherited from the nation's former status as a colony.

Still others are for conducting research, for teaching, or for public education on an aspect of language which is important in particular contexts.

Such bodies reflect the priorities and the circumstances of their society. In Australia we now have our own National Languages Institute of Australia and it, naturally, reflects the issues of importance to our country.

Australia has already achieved much in the field of language training. Too often, however, this effort has been uncoordinated. The Institute will have an invaluable role to play in helping to provide the focus needed in our national

training effort.

The Institute, which started work in June this year, has the aim of conducting the research and teaching necessary to develop the whole spectrum of language education in Australia.

Its mandate is Australia-wide and so too is its structure.

First, it has already commenced an inquiry into the Teaching of Modern Languages in Higher Education and set up a study on Estimates of Language Teacher Employment and Supply.

The findings of these two projects will shape the agenda of work for the Institute for several years to come, and will also help determine the number of teachers we train in the appropriate languages and with the appropriate skills.

Second, the Institute will run Language Testing Centres, a national data base and clearing house on languages, and four Research and Development Centres. These Centres will provide world class expertise in examining the areas of Language Acquisition Research; Language and Society; Language and Technology; and Work Place Communication.

Finally, Teaching and Curriculum Centres will investigate the appropriate use of technology in language study and will enhance the professional development of teachers, provide information and advisory services, administer overseas scholarships, and conduct teaching programs.

There are also plans to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre.

Aboriginal languages are a priceless heritage which we are in danger of losing. When Captain Cook sailed into Botany Bay, approximately 250 languages were spoken by the original inhabitants of this country. It is estimated now that only fifty may still be spoken by children into the next century.

So the Institute will contribute substantially to

the growth of Australia as a truly multilingual nation, capable of playing a more constructive and more closely enmeshed role in our region and the world.

I congratulate and commend Mr Lo Bianco, his academic colleagues and all those concerned in the establishment of the Institute. I have much pleasure in formally opening the National Languages Institute of Australia and I wish it well in its endeavours.