

○ OUR (NOT SO) POLYGLOT POLLIES

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The present article reports on research conducted during late 2004 on the language abilities of Australia's parliamentarians and a parliamentary debate in 2005 on languages in Australia. A small questionnaire was administered to all members of the nine legislative structures of Australia comprising six states, two territories and the one Federal parliament. This is the first such survey in Australia. While the response rate was uneven, from good to poor, the survey does shed light on the range and number of languages other than English spoken by Australia's parliamentary representatives, where their language capabilities were gained, how proficient they estimate themselves to be, and in what settings their language skills are used. The paper includes a comparison between these Australian data and equivalent, though slightly less sketchy, data from the UK. The article concludes with the text and debate of a recent private members' bill on languages and makes comments on the responses in light of the language abilities of the parliamentarians.

INTRODUCTION

In one sense the verbal abilities of politicians are always under scrutiny. After all, it is only through their talk and writing that most citizens encounter their elected representatives. For the most part this scrutiny focuses on rhetoric, the persuasive content and qualities of the talk of political figures engaged in the activity of persuasion. Most prominent in this regard in recent years have been Don Watson's (2003, 2004) very successful writings on political euphemism (weasel words) and corporate obfuscation, some analyses of the discourses of political apology, or asylum speaker talk, or Hanson-speak (Lo Bianco forthcoming), or policy making in debate (Lo Bianco 1999). Most popular and journalistic commentary focuses on two speech acts that seem to be perennially associated with politics and politicians: promising and lying. The *political promise* is the notorious act of political discourse, almost universally distrusted, but also seen as

an inevitable part of representative democracy, and its necessary component, campaigning for votes. The *political lie* is ‘the other’ of the political promise, the broken promise, popularly held to be its inevitable end point, usually signalled by euphemism, dissembling and other proto-lying speech acts. Sometimes discussion of the verbal abilities of politicians will address linguistic aspects of their craft, their writing or verbal expression. A minister for education who demands that literacy standards be raised, or who criticises student reading or spelling achievements as being too low, had better take care not to say that ‘standards is slipping’. Sometimes they do, and indeed one did, because politicians make mistakes, as we all do, mostly because talk is an interactive practice in which meanings are negotiated iteratively, and the text that results does not benefit from the extended revision or editorialising possibilities afforded by writing. ‘Standards is slipping’ does make it into written language when speech is reported faithfully, and sometimes because politicians, again like most of us, don’t all command grammar’s many demands.

However, politicians and their communicative standards are far less often studied in terms of their bilingual attributes, asking how many of our politicians speak languages other than English? How well do those who have non-English skills speak such languages? Where did they gain those skills? How often, on what occasions, and for what purposes do they use their bilingual skills? The present paper reports data from a survey that tested precisely these questions for all members of the Australian parliaments, and makes some comparative remarks with members of the UK Parliament. The study should be regarded as a preliminary instalment in what, ideally, might be a further, perhaps more systematic, assessment of this aspect of the communicative abilities of our elected leaders. It remains an interesting and under-researched area.

It is reasonable to ask why the language skills of parliamentarians should even be researched at all. Shouldn’t politicians just reflect the community and therefore only have our normal range and distribution of language competencies? Shouldn’t they, ideally, be just committed individuals who represent their constituencies? After all, ours is a *representative* democracy rather than a *direct* democracy. These questions are asked here because a small number of parliamentarians who refused to answer the survey made comments along these lines. Apart from the intrinsic research interest which is sufficient justification for conducting research on public figures, it is also useful to recall that languages have been the focus of public policy in Australia for almost forty years (Asian Studies Council, 1988; Auchmuty, 1970; ALLC 1994; Dawkins, 1991; Galbally, 1978; Garnaut, 1989; Lo Bianco, 1987; Senate, 1984; Rudd, 1994; Lo Bianco, 2004; Ministerial Council, 2005). All of these policies or public inquiries were conducted by or on behalf of politicians. It is clear that the national interest is associated with languages. A recent review

of these and other reports in relation to higher education (Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, forthcoming) noted that the justifications for public resources being put towards languages are five: *geo-political and strategic positioning of Australia; intellectual development of children, addressing well-established claims of cognitive benefits of bilingualism; cultural vitality; trade, commerce and national security issues; and the rights and opportunities of immigrant and indigenous Australians who speak or identify with languages other than English.*

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

The survey instrument was a one page, five item questionnaire, sent to the electoral office of every member of an Australian parliament: state, territory and federal. The original phrasing of one of the questions was unfortunately ambiguous in that the initial questionnaire used the term ‘maternal language’ in question one and did not sequence well between questions one and two. The survey gathered information about the following five areas:

1. What is your first language?
2. Have you maintained proficiency in your first language if it wasn't English?
3. Do you know other language(s)? If so, how many and what are they?
4. How well do you speak these languages?
5. Where did you learn any new languages you speak?

Data collection was undertaken from mid to late 2004, just prior to the declaration of the 2004 Federal election, which took place on October 9. The survey was sent from the parliamentary office of Ms Maria Vamvakinou, Member of the House of Representatives for the seat of Calwell in Victoria, who had listed a private member's bill seeking that the House of Representatives make a statement in support of Australian multilingualism. The data were being collected as part of the preparation of the bill. Due to the calling of the 2004 Federal election the bill proposal lapsed.

The response rate varied considerably across parliaments, with a good to satisfactory response from the House of Representatives and a low response from some state chambers. The questionnaire stimulated contact with members of parliament that extended well beyond the survey. A small number of members contacted the office of the Member for Calwell, giving reasons for not responding. One member claimed the exercise was not genuine research to support a private non-partisan House declaration, but a political stunt. In most cases, however, the reasons for non-response were politely given and

mostly to do with low staffing in parliamentary or electoral offices, absences overseas, or due to general workload pressure. Most respondents commended the initiative. These responses were more or less equal in terms of the political affiliation of the member concerned, Liberal, Labor and National Party. In a small number of cases rude, and in two cases offensive, remarks were made about languages and about people who support multilingual policies and what might motivate such interest. The extended discussion that the study produced indicates that more than a lack of interest in, or support for, the question of language competence might be reflected in the response rate.

As events unfolded, the Private Members bill was indeed debated by the Federal parliament elected on October 9, 2004. The discussion took place on March 7, 2005 and is described below. It should be noted that representatives from all sides of politics participated in the debate, and the sentiments expressed do not align in any strong way with the political affiliation of the individuals.

Before presenting the outcomes of the research some brief comments are made about the national parliamentary structure.

AUSTRALIA'S PARLIAMENTS

The nine legislative structures of Australia comprise six states, two territories and one Federal parliament. However, despite their common derivation and adherence to British Westminster procedures and operations, the parliaments of Australia are not uniform in structure and operations.

Queensland's is unicameral, comprising only the Legislative Assembly made up of 89 members. New South Wales is governed bi-camerally, with an Upper House, the Legislative Council of 42 members, and a Lower House, the Legislative Assembly of 93 members. Victoria's system is almost identical, comprising an Upper House, the Legislative Council of 44 members, and a Lower House, or Legislative Assembly of 88 members. In Tasmania, the Upper House, or Legislative Council, is made up of 15 members, while the Lower House, called there the House of Assembly, is made up of 25 members. The same names apply in South Australia, with its Upper House, or Legislative Council, made up of 22 members and its Lower House, House of Assembly, composed of 47 members. In Western Australia, the Upper House or Legislative Council is made up of 34 members, while the 57 members who comprise the Lower House sit in what is known as the Legislative Assembly.

Both of the Territories are unicameral, like Queensland. In both cases the single chamber is called the Legislative Assembly. In the Northern Territory it is made up of 25 members, while in the Australian Capital Territory it comprises 17 members.

The Federal Parliament, formally called the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, is made up of the House of Representatives, with 150, and the Senate with 75 members.

FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Of the 150 members of the House of Representatives 57 returned the questionnaire about language competencies. While questionnaire response rates are notoriously low, this response rate shows a medium level of interest in the topic. In discussions with three of the refusers (incidentally in two cases, intentionally in the third), one said *'I never respond to surveys, and I don't speak Irish'*; another pointed out the politician who sent the survey out was of a different ideological persuasion, this being sufficient reason to produce the reluctance to reply, while the third said, *'Oh that! I have too much to do...'*

Of the 57 respondents the great majority, 49, reported only English as their 'maternal' language, 1 reported dual mother tongues (English and German), and the remaining 7 named 4 different languages: Italian 3; Greek 2; French 1; and Hungarian 1.

The vast majority of the Federal Representatives who responded to the survey had no familiarity with another language; 35 of the native English speakers were completely monolingual, reporting neither any family experience nor any study of languages; while the 15 remaining native English speakers only had the most marginal proficiency in other languages. Only two claimed to be fluent in another language, and in one case the language was a 'joint' mother tongue; only six reported intermediate proficiency in a language other than English, but in most cases this too was the respondent's mother tongue. All those Members for whom English was not the mother tongue had learned English fluently, but most had not retained fluent knowledge of their first language.

The results show extremely low levels of knowledge of languages other than English among the members of Australia's House of Representatives, poor levels of retention of non-English mother tongues, and offer a generally uninspiring vision of the languages competence of the Australian parliament.

The seven Representatives who reported having a language other than English as their first spoken language appear to have maintained skill in these languages. The French, Hungarian and one Greek respondents claimed to be fluent in these languages, while

one Greek and two Italian-speaking respondents reported ‘intermediate’ proficiency, with the remaining Italian respondent admitting to only ‘basic’ knowledge of Italian. The mother tongue English respondents are mostly monolingual; 35 knew no other languages. 12, however, did and 3 of these knew more than one additional language. This pattern of widespread monolingualism with concentrations of plurilingualism is common, but as the comparison with State and Territory parliaments shows, there are some fascinating differences.

The total number of second languages known by the Representatives, both those of English mother tongue background and the others, was no more impressive, with only 13 languages nominated. 8 reported knowledge of French, but only one of these claimed fluency; 7 described their skill as basic, using the codings provided by the questionnaire; while several added words like ‘very’ or ‘embarrassingly’ in the margins. 7 reported knowledge of Italian, but none claimed fluency, 3 described their skill as basic, and 4 as intermediate. 2 each claimed German and Japanese, both at the basic level. The 2 claims for Greek were at the intermediate level. One respondent claimed skill in each of Chinese, Hebrew, Korean, Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian and Thai, all at the basic level, and many further qualified their claim to proficiency with remarks in the margin; most common were comments like ‘just a little’ and ‘really not very much at all’. These language skills were gained in diverse settings, mostly in formal education, in private lessons and by living abroad.

It is commonly reported in the media that Mr Kevin Rudd, the Leader of the Opposition, is a former diplomat fluent in Chinese, but no survey response was received from Mr Rudd’s office. The frequency of references to Mr Rudd’s language skill possibly suggests that journalists are well aware of how uncommon bilingualism is in the House – a perception well supported by the above data.

SENATE

Of the 75 Federal Senators only 20 returned the questionnaire, of whom 18 had English as their ‘maternal’ language, 1 reported having Italian, still spoken fluently, and the other Greek, now only spoken at a basic level, as the languages of their childhoods.

Of the 18 respondents from English-speaking backgrounds 9 had no familiarity with another language, being completely monolingual, reporting neither any experience with another language nor any study at all of another language. Among the remaining 9 English mother tongue speakers, one claimed ‘intermediate’ skill in French, but no other Senator had proficiency in a language beyond ‘basic’ levels. Four claimed to speak more than two languages, while four claimed single additional languages. However, apart

from the francophone Senator who reported intermediate skill, none of the others reported skill beyond ‘basic’.

If these results, both in numbers and proficiency rates, expose extremely low levels of knowledge of languages other than English among Australia’s Senators, there is little consolation in the range of languages either. Four claimed basic French and one each claimed Chinese, German, Indonesian, Malay, Latin, Portuguese and Spanish. Some of the scribbled comments in the margins of the questionnaire provide little hope that the Senators are underestimating their language competencies. The language skills claimed by the respondents were gained in formal education for the most part, though in five cases (languages not Senators) ‘living abroad’ was the mode of language learning.

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Nine responses out of a possible seventeen make for a good response rate from the ACT’s unicameral legislature. The Legislative Assembly members who replied claimed English (8) and Greek (1) as home languages, with the Greek speaker having maintained fluency in the language.

Only three of the English mother tongue Assembly members had no additional language, two had one additional language, while three reported more than one additional language. However, if so far the bilingual competencies of the ACT Legislative are looking promising by comparison with their Federal counterparts across Lake Burley Griffin, the reported proficiency skills are disappointingly similar.

While three claimed French, there is one claimant for each of Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, German and Indonesian, but only the German speaker reported skills beyond the basic level. Most of this language capability is the result of school or university study (4 respondents), while in two cases this skill was achieved through living abroad.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The New South Wales political structure comprises an Upper House, the Legislative Council with 42 members, and a Lower House, Legislative Assembly of 93 members. A positive 42 responses from the possible of 93 were received, revealing that 35 reported English as their ‘maternal’ language, 4 Italian, 2 Greek and 1 Maltese.

The four Italian speakers spanned the competency range, with two reporting fluency, one intermediate and one basic; the Greek speakers both reported intermediate skill, while the Maltese respondent claimed fluency in the language. Of the 35 English natives, 24 are monolinguals, 9 reported speaking one other language, and two reported knowing two other languages. Seven languages featured as the learned languages, but only one of

these (Italian) was said to be spoken fluently; the others claimed Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, Latin and Samoan, and apart from two intermediate skill level claims for French, all the others are only known at a basic level.

A high proportion of the NSW Legislative Assembly respondents gained their language skill in family environments (7) compared to only 4 at school or university.

Only 12 responses were received from the members of the NSW upper house, the Legislative Council, 9 of these reporting English as the ‘maternal’ language, 2 Arabic and 1 Greek; the latter claiming fluency, but the Arabic speakers reported only ‘intermediate’ skills. Among the English mother tongue speakers there were similar proportions to those encountered within the other Parliaments. Only one reported speaking a language other than English, and two claimed two other languages. Compared to their lower house compatriots the Legislative Councillors only claimed French, German and Italian skills, the latter two languages known only at the basic skill level (1 Italian and 2 German), while the 2 French claimants were at the intermediate level. The bulk of this language learning was gained through school, university and private study rather than from home use or living abroad.

QUEENSLAND

The Parliament of Queensland is unicameral and elicited 31 out of 89 possible responses; 29 of the respondents reported English as the maternal language, with only one claimant each for Cantonese and Greek, the non-English mother tongues. The latter two, however, reported fluency in their non-English languages, with the Cantonese speaker also claiming proficiency in Mandarin.

The language learning range and proficiency among the Queensland state parliamentarians involved 10 languages: Dutch (1 at basic and 1 at intermediate skill levels), French (3 basic and 1 intermediate), German (2 basic level claimants), 1 Indonesian/Malay at the intermediate level, 1 Japanese at the intermediate level, and one each for Mandarin, Melanesian Pidgin and Spanish, all at the basic level. This means that not one respondent had learned a language other than English to fluency, though the sites through which these language skills were gained were reasonably widespread compared to other parliaments, involving private study, school and university courses, living abroad, self-tutoring, and hosting live-in international students.

VICTORIA

Victoria’s governance system comprises an Upper House, a Legislative Council of 44 members, and a Lower House, or Legislative Assembly of 88 members. For the Legislative

Assembly only 23 responses were received, 18 of whom declared an English mother tongue and 5 a non-English mother tongue. The latter comprised 1 Greek claimant, 1 Italian, 2 German, 1 Croatian and 1 Spanish mother tongue; all of these individuals declared that they were fluent in these languages, with the exception of the Greek speaker who reported intermediate skill. Only 3 of the English home background speakers declared that they knew other languages, and in one case the member reported knowing more than two other languages.

The acquired languages of Victoria's lower house members are 5 in number (Arabic, Dutch, French, 3 claimants, Indonesian and Latin) and all are known only at a basic level of skill.

Victoria's upper house members number 44, but only 12 returned the questionnaire forms. Eight declared English as their mother tongue (though one stated that there was an additional language spoken at home but this was not named). Four other mother tongues were nominated: Dutch (2), Italian (1) and Turkish (1), with only the Turkish claimant reporting fluency, the Italian reporting intermediate skill, and the two Dutch speakers only having basic skill in that language. The upper house language learning performance, possibly exacerbated by the small response rate, is very modest indeed. Only 8 of the 12 who responded filled out this particular question, seven claiming no other languages, only one respondent claimed one additional language, and only two language claims were made, French and German, both at the basic level of competence.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In Western Australia, the Upper House or Legislative Council is made up of 34 members, while the 57 members who comprise the Lower House sit in what is known as the Legislative Assembly.

Twenty-three of these returned the questionnaire, and all described themselves as having English as their mother tongue, although one respondent claimed two mother tongues (Irish and English), and a further one claimed three (English, Welsh and 'Czechoslovak'), though all of these languages, with the exception of English, were described as 'poor' or 'very basic'. Irish proficiency, however, was ranked as 'intermediate'. Nine of the 24 respondents, however, reported learning additional languages, with one of these indicating he/she had acquired more than two. Of these seven claimed French (six at basic competence, one at intermediate competence), two claimed Italian, both at basic level, and one claimed a 'smattering' of Malay. Most had studied these languages at school or university or had acquired them while living abroad.

As far as the upper house is concerned 18 of 34 possible responses were received, all of whom were English mother tongue speakers. Six of these had acquired other languages, among whom two stated that they spoke two or more additional languages. Six languages were named: French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Italian and Portuguese, all at the basic level of skill except for two intermediates, one in Italian and the other in German. None of these respondents had acquired their language capabilities at home, all in formal study.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The South Australian Legislative Council, the state's upper house, is made up of 22 members, and its Lower House, the House of Assembly, is composed of 47.

Of the 47 House of Assembly members 27 returned the questionnaire. 25 of these claimed English as their mother tongue, while 2 nominated Italian, which both claimed to speak fluently. Seven of the 27 respondents had acquired languages in addition to their mother tongue, with two stating they had learned two or more additional languages. The range of languages nominated and the level of proficiency claimed are revealing because of the presence of an Indigenous language. A total of 8 languages were nominated with the two French speakers rating themselves at the intermediate level, while along with the one speaker of Pitjantjatjara, all the others claimed only basic level capability. Some marked the questionnaire with marginal comments like 'very' before basic, or 'not really'. These languages were German, Italian, Korean, Latin, Malay and Spanish, and were mostly acquired in formal education.

Only 7 responses from a possible 22 were received from the Legislative Council. Of these 7 only two mother tongues were featured, 5 respondents nominating English and 2 nominating Italian. One Italian mother tongue respondent described his/her skill as basic, while the other stated that he/she spoke Italian fluently. Only one of the English mother tongue speakers reported having learned an additional language, this being 'basic' Auslan.

TASMANIA

In Tasmania, the Upper House, or Legislative Council, is made up of 15 members, while the Lower House, called there the House of Assembly, is made up of 25 members. Nine of these 25 returned the questionnaire form. For 8 of these English was the mother tongue, while in one case the response indicated that Dutch was also a mother tongue. The ninth claimed Greek as 'maternal' language. The Greek mother tongue was rated as 'intermediate' while Dutch was still spoken 'fluently'. Three respondents stated that

they had since acquired additional languages; in one case the respondent marked ‘two or more’, these being French and German, but the skill levels claimed were low.

7 members of the upper house, or Legislative Council, returned their questionnaires, all reporting only English as the mother tongue. Two had ‘studied’ other languages while one had studied ‘two or more’. All the reported skill levels were ‘basic’, and the languages were French, Greek, German, Indonesian and Turkish.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Northern Territory is governed by a unicameral chamber of 25 members formally known as the Legislative Assembly. 10 responses were received, with seven stating that English was the members’ mother tongue, and one each for Chinese (intermediate proficiency), Dutch (basic proficiency) and Greek (fluent speaker). Among the English native speakers three had acquired additional languages, these being French (two members, basic competence), Indonesian (one member, basic skill) and ‘Bahusu Melayu’ (one member, claiming ‘reasonable’ skill). School, university and ‘special courses’ were the modalities through which these language skills were gained.

WESTMINSTER

Since political devolution in 1997 there are several parliaments or assemblies in the United Kingdom. While the comments made here relate only to Westminster, the UK and English parliament, it should be noted that the regional and other parliaments and assemblies can be very active in language issues. In the Welsh Assembly especially there is vibrant and frequent use of Welsh. The Scottish Parliament is active in officially acknowledging the national status of Scottish Gaelic (Lo Bianco 2001), though it is rarely used in the Parliament. The stalled parliament of Northern Ireland has also considered language policy issues, and Irish would in all probability be occasionally used there, with the possibility of ‘Ulster Scots’ also being used from time to time.

There is an assembly for the Isle of Man which recognises Manx, though only ritualistic use of the language appears to occur. There has been some interest in recent years in establishing a representative assembly for Cornwall too, and there are known to be active efforts for the revival of Cornish, but the situation there would be more like the Isle of Man than Wales.

In April 2004 the *National Institute of Adult Continuing Education* conducted a survey which it described as ‘challenging MPs to reveal their language skills and aspirations’ (NIACE 2004). There are 646 Members of Parliament in Westminster, and of

these only 112 MPs responded to the NIACE survey, with 22 declining participation. The political distribution was noted by NIACE: 16.4% of Labour MPs responded, 16.4% of Conservatives, nearly 30% of Liberal Democrats, and 50% from Plaid Cymru, a Welsh national party.

Of the 112 MPs who responded, 103 cited English as their ‘mother tongue’ (four cited ‘Scots English’, ‘Yorkshire’ or ‘Geordie’ as their language of childhood), while three cited Welsh, one Punjabi and one Estonian. The British parliamentarians responded that they speak 22 languages in total. According to the NIACE data the percentage of respondents who reported language skills, other than bilingual proficiency, were as follows.

- 56% could communicate in French – 49% poorly, 43% fairly and 8% fluently;
- 21% could communicate in German;
- 5.5% could communicate in Latin;
- 4.5% could communicate in Italian;
- 3.5% could communicate in Russian;
- 3.5% could communicate in Welsh; and
- 3% could communicate in Spanish.

Other languages cited included Bengali, British Sign Language, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, Gaelic, Hindi, Norwegian, Portuguese, Serbo-Croat, Swedish and Urdu.

Twenty-one MPs said they were bi-lingual, with French as the most common language.

Nine MPs said they were multi-lingual, again with French as the most common language used by multi-lingual MPs, and seven were currently learning a language, three of these were learning Welsh, two were learning French, one was learning Bengali and one Portuguese. While this number was small, an impressive 65% responded that, given the time and opportunity, they would like to learn one or more languages. They nominated their languages of interest: 34% would like to learn French, 32% Spanish, 15% Italian, 11% German, nearly 7% Arabic or Russian, 4% Chinese, 3% Japanese or Punjabi. Nearly 19% were monolingual English speakers.

Although the surveys are not identical, there are enough indicators to suggest that the language competencies of Westminster MPs are slightly more impressive than those of their Australian counterparts. We can infer two sources for this superiority. First, there is a clear, if small, effect from the non-English speaking component parts of the UK. The indigenous Celtic languages are represented among the speakers, as are dialects of English. Second, the proximity, and ancient relations with France, and of course the very prominent role of French within the European Union and Council of Europe, since

most of the constituent institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe are in French-speaking cities (Brussels and Strasbourg). French has additionally been the dominant second language in British schools for some considerable time. To a lesser extent, and with the addition of even greater economic ties, we can account for the representation of German. However, the very low representation of the main community languages of Britain – languages such as Bengali, Urdu, Panjabi, Arabic and Greek – makes this result even worse than the picture we find in Australian parliaments.

THE PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILL

After being deferred due to the holding of the 2004 Federal election, Ms Vamvakinou's Bill was eventually listed for discussion on Monday March 7, 2005. Hansard (2005) records that an item called *Language* was debated under Private Members' Business. The Member for Calwell moved, 'That this House:

1. recognise that the English language is the most common and unifying language amongst Australians;
2. recognises and supports immigrants and indigenous Australians who speak languages other than English and encourages them to retain these languages as they acquire English;
3. recognises the profound and lasting benefits of second language learning for individuals and the nation: intellectual development, cultural sensitivity, greater equality and enhancement in trade and diplomacy;
4. recognises that despite successive government policies on the matter of language learning we have not really succeeded in reaping maximum benefits of the multilingual resources of the Australian people;
5. recognises that Australia should base its national policy on languages on the principles of 'English Plus' which can be expressed as the four E's: enrichment, economics, equality and external; and
6. recognises that Australia needs to elevate the recognition of the importance of language as a skill and resource, both for individuals and as a nation in domestic and international domains.' (Hansard 2005: 30.)

The item was debated for 31 minutes, from 3:45 PM. After the mover's speech a seconder was gained and then 5 other members spoke in the debate. At 3:51 the debate was open with Mr Barresi (Deakin) the first participant. During his few minutes the Member for Deakin supported the basic aims of the Bill, and defended the government's

record on languages. Mr Barresi represented himself as an immigrant with personal experience of language learning, and stated that this experience was the basis for his sensitivity towards languages.

At 3:56 Mr O'Connor (Gorton), declared himself *'the first monolingualist to enter this debate'*. He went on to support the Bill, described the ethnic diversity of his electorate, spoke of his own immigrant experience and pointed out the need for immigrants to *'enter... fully'* into their new host society. The Member for Gorton also noted that language skills are *'not recognised in a remunerative sense in their employment conditions'* such as for home care workers looking after the elderly.

Ms Moylan (Pearce) then spoke. She commenced her talk at 4:01 with congratulatory remarks about the member for Calwell, and commended the personalised immigrant experience of the member for Deakin. The Member for Pearce then related the experiences of a Japanese teacher from her electorate and their in country study-work in Japan. She then proceeded to enumerate findings from an unreferenced study on languages education policy, making specific mention of problems of teacher supply and retention, and of the positive impact of bilingualism on literacy.

The longest intervention was from Mr Adams (Lyons), who rose to speak at 4:06. The Member for Lyons also commended the initiative and referred to the importance of English for *'health and wellbeing, understanding the law and all those sorts of things'*, but made the point that *'second language skills are becoming more important'* and linked this claim to Asian trade ties. Mr Adams' talk reported on business misunderstandings, especially in China, and made the claim that English is an unusually difficult language, stating that *'... even native speakers of English find it difficult'*, with the *'daunting'* prospect of gaining literacy in English compounded by the need for foreigners to also learn *'Australian slang – Aussie slang or 'Strine'*. For the member for Lyons this problem reflects Australian culture where *'... a lot of corners are cut both with what we say and how we say it, and it is pretty incomprehensible to outsiders – even to the English'*, a theme he developed in relation to cultural references in speech, local knowledge (*'the system of government in Tasmania'*), informality, compared to *'... the Japanese and Chinese'* and went on to claim respect for Aboriginal languages and make a point about the self-knowledge that Australians could gain from knowing Aboriginal languages *'Yet we seem to give scant attention to language when we talk on issues of welfare and wellbeing'*. He concluded by stating that Labor had *'started to address what it means to be a multicultural nation. This government has now turned this nation into a fearful one'*.

At 4:11 the final speaker, Mr Wakelin (Grey) also began by commending the motion and anecdotalising about being recognised for both his English and his accent in Brussels,

bolstering claims about the power of English in the world. However the Member for Grey spoke mostly of ‘... *the Aboriginal people of the Pitjantjatjara lands*’ in his electorate of Grey and their ability to code-switch between English and Pitjantjatjara. He cited claims about the superiority of first language instruction as a basis for enhanced learning of English, and therefore of bilingualism.

At 4:16 PM debate was adjourned, with the mover gaining a verbal undertaking that an additional 5 minutes might be possible in Private Members’ Business, but only in an unspecified later sitting period. A search of Hansard and checking with the research assistant in the parliamentary office of the Member for Calwell on 16 June 2006 reveals that so far those ‘additional 5 minutes’ have yet to materialise.

CONCLUSION

While sometimes personal or vicarious multilingual experiences lead parliamentarians to oppose positive moves for multilingualism, in the majority of cases direct experience, whether personal or through others, of diverse languages constitutes a supportive backdrop of interest in languages other than English. The speakers in the debate who were themselves either speakers of other languages, language learners, or immigrants with some knowledge of other languages, based their comments on these experiences, in all cases favourably.

Parliamentary speeches are remarkable for their narrative content. In many debates Members and Senators foreground stories of their own personal experiences, or of those of their families and friends, and often of individual constituents. From the Hansard it is clear that Members of Parliament of immigrant origin, those who are of Indigenous background, or who represent Indigenous constituents, and those who have been teachers, or who have lived in non-English speaking countries, typically draw on these experiences to validate languages, bilingualism, multiculturalism. It is difficult not to note a discrepancy between the rather poor knowledge of other languages in the parliament, and the generally positive responses to the Bill. However, this discrepancy is mostly accounted for by the strongly self-selecting character of those speaking in the debate on the Bill. Although it could be said that choosing to return survey forms is also a self selecting exercise, the data do not really bear this out, since many respondents were quite willing to admit to zero language competencies.

This research has revealed that there is a disparity between the deep and wide multilingualism of Australian society and the shallow depth and narrow range of linguistic backgrounds among Australia’s parliamentarians. That our representatives are so unrepre-

representative of an important characteristic of our population is salutary in light of the personalisation of so much parliamentary speech making.

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