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AUSTRALIA-BRITAIN SOCIETY
NSW PLAIN ENGLISH-SPEAKING AWARDS
SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE 19 AUGUST 1983

PLAIN ENGLISH AND THE POWER OF A WINK AND A SNIFF

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The Hon Mr Justice M D Kirby CMG
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

A LANGUAGE FOR THE SPACE AGE

I apologise for breaking the rules and using very obvious notes. But I have just spoken elsewhere about foetal transplants. Tonight I must address the Master Plumbers' dinner. Unless I read this speech, you might get a very surprising talk about plumbing — human or mechanical. I read my speeches if only to ensure I give each audience the right one.

When a Russian astronaut was asked by an inquisitive American newsman: 'But what language will you speak in space?' he said, without a moment's comradely introspection, 'No problem. English'.

It is said that the English established their empire in a fit of absence of mind. Certainly, everywhere throughout the world that there was an unclaimed rock, some Englishman considered he had a sacred duty to raise the Union Jack. The result was the spread, to the four corners of the earth, of English food, English sport, English law and the English language.

Of English food, I think the less said, the better. As to English sport, I have always regarded the obsessions of the Australian population with the antics of grown men running around after a football or standing at silly mid off, as silly in the extreme. As for English law, though it has many strengths, I am professionally bound to declare that there are also many weaknesses. The whole business of law reform is dedicated to rooting out those weaknesses.

But of the English tongue, I will hear no criticism. It is not the language spoken by most people on earth. It is bedevilled by mischievous spelling. It has sounds which have been known to cause the fracture of the jaw of foreigners struggling to get their tongues around the gentile 'th', as in 'thing'. But it is the last remaining bastion of the British Empire. The sun may have set on the Empire, but it is still rising on the English language.

These facts are brought home, wherever you travel in the world:

- * In the midst of India, I found few white faces. The statues of Queen Victoria had been removed to the museum. But, in the smallest village, people, shyly at first and then boldly, would speak to you in the language of that far-away northern country.
- * Lately, I have had to attend international conferences in Paris. The French, rightly proud of their beautiful language, despair the rise and rise of English. Now, even the Italians, the Spanish and the Portuguese — Latin races all — address these conferences in English. The Scandinavians, the Japanese, the Dutch and the Germans have long since done so. Only the French and the Belgians hold out, proudly. The Irish grudgingly speak English. The Americans attempt to do so. Australians and even New Zealanders offer their versions. The triumph of English as the language of developing world government is undoubted.

These are not matters for post-Imperial boastfulness. They are simply facts of life. The development of world travel in telecommunications, a common language was suddenly needed. Three things assured the success of our language in this race:

- * the political and economic importance of Britain in the first half of the century
- * the widespread scattering of English-speaking communities in every part of the world, and
- * the growing economic dominance of the United States, whose trade was, with monolingual arrogance, conducted exclusively in English.

We in Australia are the beneficiaries of these developments.

WE MUST BE FREE OR DIE

But so are the other countries of the world who have come to share our tongue. As I sit at the international conferences, I marvel at the facility with which Finns and Japanese, Danes and Greeks discuss difficult and important issues of politics and technology in the English language.

But with the English language goes access to the whole world of English ideas. It has become a little fashionable of late to decry the contribution of England to mankind. The English had their faults. First amongst these was a certain frostiness and aloofness. Many people thought this derived from a feeling of superiority. My own view is that it derived more likely, from a reaction to English cooking.

But the English language is not aloof. It is the vehicle for concepts such as:

- the Rule of law
- representative parliamentary democracy
- independent and honest judges
- an incorruptible public service
- the importance of individual freedoms protected by the law
- a generally relaxed and unobsessive society, more tolerant than most.

'We must be free or die that speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake' was the assertion of Wordsworth at the time of Napoleon's invasions. The English language is the vehicle for carrying English ideas around the world. It was inevitable, as colonial people learned the language and used it to read into the literature of our tongue, that they should assert the rights and freedoms which the English themselves had fought for and won.

MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

Now, in Australia, we rejoice in a multicultural society. When the history books are written, I believe that the general acceptance of multiculturalism will be seen as one of Mr Fraser's most important contributions to our country. Pride in the English language, as the international vehicle of communication, is something that can now be shared with citizens who derive from other cultures. We are still shamefully monolingual in Australia. Indeed, there has been an actual decline in the number of students learning other languages at school. It will be a happy day, and not I suspect far off, when the finalists in this competition come forward, with Greek, Vietnamese or Arabic mother tongues, to win the Plain English Speaking Awards. That will represent the ultimate recognition of the most important remnant of the British Empire. The English language is more permanent than colonial buildings, cenotaphs, railway lines or even laws. In the age of technology we need more and better communication than ever before. In the age of nuclear weaponry, a failure to communicate is a recipe for disaster.

THE COMPETITION

And now I congratulate the finalists in the Plain English Speaking Competition this year. I put the emphasis on 'plain'. Though it has a great literature, English is not a highly stylised language. Unlike the French, we do not have a learned commission of scholars to determine acceptable and unacceptable linguistic developments. English just grows, as befits a world language which is now in the possession of so many different people. And though it may not be as beautiful of sound as French, or as common as Chinese, as dramatic as Italian, or as strong as German and Arabic, it is a language of great power. It combines, since the Norman Conquest, the strengths of its Germanic base and the beauty of its Latin conquerers.

And I say 'plain' because the force and power of English does not depend upon a highly cultivated style — as is the case in other languages. One of the finest English judges of this century, Lord Birkett, writing in Reflections in Retirement, once gave a powerful example of what I am trying to say:

I have known advocates in my time of the most powerful and persuasive kind, whose acquaintance with law and letters was of the slenderest kind, if it existed at all. In my very early days at the Bar, I used to watch a particular advocate with something approaching amazement. For he rarely finished a sentence, he disdained the use of the aspirate, and his vocabulary was not distinguished. But he had a most knowing and powerful wink for juries. And his sniff was extremely effective — and he got verdicts!

So my parting advice for lovers of plain English is — cultivate literature. Cultivate the language. Study words. Never forget the power of ideas, as Mark Swivel has reminded us. But never forget too the power of a wink and a sniff!