REITH LECTURES 1949:
Britain in Europe: Reflections on the Development of a European Society

Robert Birley

Lecture 3: The Problem of a Common Language

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When we come to consider how the closer association of Britain with Europe is likely to affect education in this country, we almost certainly think of teaching more foreign history and, perhaps, more about current events, and of revising our school textbooks. I am very doubtful whether such changes will be of great importance. It is becoming a stock solution for every problem to suggest that something new should be added to the curriculum of the schools. No doubt the demands made on us by our decision to join European Union will eventually affect what we teach. In one very important part of education, the teaching of languages, the effect should be immediate. With that I shall deal later. Whether much is gained by teaching current events in school is not a question to be dealt with here, but those who believe in it will no doubt want to spend rather more time on foreign affairs. Personally I should be glad if more European history could be taught, but I doubt whether this will make the difference some people imagine it will. It is worth noting that imperial history has never played a part of any significance in our education, but it can hardly be suggested that we have not made a success of creating and developing an Empire. It is important that our textbooks should be reasonable and fair-minded about other nations -and actually it is extremely difficult to· find an English textbook which is not but we should be in a bad way if we felt that the kind of teaching in our schools depended on the kind of textbooks we used. Some of the best lessons are given when the teacher comes into his class, burning with indignation about something in the book they are using.

What the Universities Can Do

We shall have to go much further than this. The first duty lies with the universities. They cannot help having a profound influence on the culture of the nation; and, incidentally, their attitude largely determines in the end the kind of teaching given in the schools. They, in particular, will have to work to end the intellectual isolation of this country, and I must deal with some of the ways in which they might do this.

Everyone believes today that it is a good thing for the young people, and especially the students, of different nations to meet one another. We must not expect too much from casual encounters. One of the most depressing experiences I have had in Germany has been that of being told by young Germans about the international students' conferences and courses and similar meetings which they attended before the war. So often they have ended by saying that they felt that it was all to no purpose, as a few years later they were engaged in fighting the very people with whom they had thought they were making friends this was particularly depressing for me as it was an important part of our policy in Germany to encourage such conferences at the universities in the British zone. There was a special reason for doing this, as the spiritual and cultural isolation of Germany, deliberately fostered by the Nazis, had to be broken down somehow. But useful .as these conferences were, and in the years

immediately after the war they were really essential, they were in no way a final answer to the problem of restoring the right relationships between Germany and the rest of the world. Simply for students to meet together for short periods in pleasant surroundings will not do enough to foster the kind of unity in ways of thinking which will be necessary in Europe.

The universities will have to do much more than holding international courses for students. They will have to do more even than, organising visits of students from other countries for longer periods- for instance, for a month or a term as some British universities have done -which has been a much more valuable contribution. What is needed is the restoration of the internationalism which was characteristic of the universities of the Middle Ages. It was then quite usual for a student to attend a university in another country than his own. This had some quite practical results. For instance, it was a sign that a university was finally recognised when it secured the power to confer on its students the right to teach anywhere, which meant in any other country. The close connections between the universities enabled them to form and express a European academic public opinion, which paid no attention to the boundaries between the states.

But universities are now almost completely national institutions and it is for this reason that plans are now being widely considered for setting up special institutions where students of different countries may work together, such as the College of Europe, started recently at Bruges under the sponsorship of the European Movement. These cannot take the place of the regular universities and it is, therefore, intended that the students should attend them for special courses to study subjects which seem to be particularly closely related to international problems, such as modern history, political economy or political science.

Something on these lines may be all that is possible at the moment and such plans deserve every encouragement, but they do not give us the answer to the problem of how the universities can once more help to fashion a common culture in Europe. For it is not enough for young men and women to study political or economic problems together: that must inevitably be superficial. What is wanted is that they should work together at the fundamental academic disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, languages and mathematics. Only in this way will they come really to understand each other’s way of thought. It will be almost as important for it to become more common for professors and lecturers to teach in the universities of other countries.

There are a few developments in the universities today which will certainly lead to students of different countries working together. One of them is in our own country. At Oxford it has been decided, as a result of the most intelligent munificence of a single benefactor, to found a new college, St. Anthony’s, which will not be some special institution only for those who have completed their normal university course, but an ordinary Oxford college. In this it is intended that a high proportion of the students should come from France, and it is also laid down that no applicants for admission shall be subject to any test of a religious, political, or racial character. The entry of the students will be governed by the ordinary regulations of the university, but it should be realised that these already admit students from foreign countries who have attained certain academic standards. And if any feel that it is not particularly international to have a preference for students from France, they may be comforted by

realising that in this the university is closely following the medieval custom, For many of the' universities of the Middle Ages were divided into separate 'Nations' as they were called. It was thought then that it was more important that students from different countries should work together than live together; which was very sensible, St. Anthony's College should be one of the most interesting experiments in European education. With it may be compared plans for the establishment of a large residential centre for foreign students at Gottingen University in Germany. If these proposals are carried through successfully, Gottingen will become a university with a very distinctly European outlook.

Meeting the Needs of Foreign Students

We must remember that Oxford and Cambridge are almost unique among universities in: being organised, practically completely, in residential colleges. Nearly all universities in Europe, like most of those in Britain, are not residential. Gottingen shows one way in which such universities may deal with the problem. Another is to be found in the idea of what is called the University City, which is now being actively pursued in Paris, that is the setting aside of a part of the university town or city for the residence of the students, who will gain in this way a much stronger corporate life. The supporters of this policy in Paris have particularly in mind the needs of foreign students, who should find it, in consequence, much easier to enter fully into the life of the university.

There is, however, one difficulty still to be considered; which is much more formidable than any others which I have touched on. The internationalism of the Middle Ages was made possible by the existence of a common language, Latin. And all projects for drawing the universities closer together, even that of the special institutions, of which I spoke, will founder unless the problem of creating a common language for the Union is solved. Without doubt that is the fundamental educational question to be faced. Nor is it one that only concerns the universities. The position is that today only comparatively few people in Western Europe, except those in some of the smaller nations, can speak with any degree of comfort in any language but their own. And even when they are fluent in another language, it may well not be that of the person with whom they wish to converse.

In .order to avoid misunderstanding, I had better make it dear that we do not need a common language merely for international conferences. A common language is needed for ordinary intercourse between peoples of different nations. Although we have come up against the problem when considering the future of the universities of Europe, we must not imagine that this need will be confined to scholars. It will be an essential requirement for free and unembarrassed conversation between all those of different nationalities in the Union who will have to meet one another on any footing other than that of tourists. It is no use our thinking that we are going to understand Europe, if we cannot speak with Europeans. And, as we cannot possibly hope that more than a· very few people will ever be able to speak several languages, the only solution will be the adoption of a common language by all the states comprising the Union.

The Latin-speaking Workman

This does not mean that everyone must always speak the same language, at home and abroad. The whole of what we now call the Middle East was bound together at the time of Christ by a common language, Greek, but the various peoples in it normally used their own different tongues. In the Guildhall Museum there is a tile from Roman times on which someone scratched the words, translated into English, ,'Austalis has been going off on his own every day this fortnight'. They are written in Latin, but no doubt the workman who wrote this irritable accusation against his mate usually spoke the native tongue of Britain. But Latin had become a common language in the western part of the Roman Empire, or, to come to present times, we have only to think how English has become the common language of the educated classes of India.

It may seem impossible for us to adopt a common language as a conscious decision of policy, without going through the political or social processes which have always led to its adoption in the past. The political process has been one of military conquest, but, as Dr. Arnold Toynbee has shown, throughout history a common language has constantly been created peacefully by seafaring or nomadic peoples. But obviously there is no question of a common language being adopted in Western Europe as the result of conquest or the wanderings of tribes or the ubiquity of sailors.

This does not mean, however, that it will be impossible for Western Europe to find a common language. We must not forget a revolution that has taken place in Europe during the last few generations, the extension of what we call secondary education to far wider circles than ever before. And, further, every state now controls in some degree the curriculum of all schools in its state system of education and indirectly thin of the schools outside this. For the first time in history it would be perfectly possible for every state in a Union to decide that a certain language, the same for all, should be taught as the first foreign living language in all its schools. (I say the first living language, as I do not want to raise the very controversial issue whether it is desirable to start learning Latin before tackling a modern language, a principle which is held passionately by many in Europe today.) But, before we consider what steps would be necessary to secure this, we had better give some thought to the question, what language should be chosen. This is likely to be a more difficult problem to solve than that of the means of adopting it, once the selection has been made.

It is only right to consider first the claims of one of the various artificial languages which have been invented by persons who are already conscious of this need for a common speech. The proposal to use an artificial language ought not to be simply dismissed out of hand, even if it is distasteful, as it probably is, to many well-educated people. An artificial language is never likely to be commonly used without some political decision of the kind which we are considering. But, if that decision were made in its favour, there would be nothing impossible in its adoption. It would have two great advantages. First, it would probably be a great deal easier to learn than a living one, for it would have been constructed with the aim of simplicity in mind. And, secondly, which is even more important, its adoption would not offend the *amour-propre* of any nation which might dislike the language of another country being chosen rather than its own. For all that, there are arguments against an artificial language which seem to me to be decisive. To begin with, time would have to be wasted in teaching it to almost all the teachers of languages. But, further, and what is more important, if a language is to be the vehicle of any but the simplest thoughts, it

must have a literature behind it. It is use in speaking and, even more, in writing that really makes a language. In fact, no one knows what would happen to an artificial language once it came to be extensively used. It would almost certainly become more complicated. People, too, want to learn a language not only to speak it, but to read in it, and an artificial one has no literature.

If we decide against an artificial language, and I have no doubt myself that we should do so, the only alternative would be to choose a living language and then plan deliberately for it to be taught as the first foreign living language in all the states of the Union. And here we should face a real difficulty. It would be quite possible, and no doubt in some ways very sensible, to set up a committee of experts to study the problem and make the decision. They would have to consider, first, the present situation. It would be useless to choose a language which is now hardly studied at all in other countries for, just as with an artificial language, we should have to waste time in training so many of the teachers. The committee would have to bear in mind also which languages were comparatively easy to learn, for some are much more difficult than others. Above all, they would have to consider what I might call the competence of the language, whether it is one in which it is easy to express one's ideas so that they can be clearly understood.

If we were to adopt this sensible way of approaching the problem, I have very little doubt that the language chosen would be French" It is not very difficult in its grammar and syntax, compared with most others. It is certainly the best language for clear and concise expression. It was not only the political power of France that caused it to be the normal language of diplomacy until recent times. It is widely studied in other countries. But, unfortunately, it is probable that it would be very difficult for the states of the Union to approach the question so sensibly. On matters of such importance it is not usual to leave decisions to committees of experts, and perhaps that is wise, as experts, are likely to ignore irrational but real elements in the problem, which do not concern them, but which have a way of settling the issue. I am afraid that the language chosen would most probably be English. English is already the most usual first foreign language taught in Western Europe and that is a very important practical argument in its favour. We have also to remember the influence of the United States of America. Finally, there is to be considered the extent to which English is already used outside Europe, apart from the United States.

Case against English

It would be in many ways unfortunate if English were to be chosen. It has the great disadvantage of being an easy language to start, 'because of its very simple grammar, but a difficult language in which to become proficient, because of its complex syntax. It is made unnecessarily difficult by its fantastic spelling. It is also proving itself very ill adapted to the needs of the modern world. No other language is being so contorted or being rendered so ugly by bureaucracy as English. It is a language in which it is very easy to be lazy.

The difficulty about this matter of the choice is that the nation whose language was chosen would undoubtedly gain great advantages, especially in the sphere of commerce. There would be no escape from this, whatever language was chosen. But the possession of a common language is so important for the future of a European

Union that this difficulty would have to be ignored. It might be held that the use of a particular language would also give that nation political advantages, but that is much more doubtful. Some would say that the whole culture of the Union would be affected by the language chosen, as people would come to think in the way the language directed. This is surely nonsense. A language does not create a way of thinking: it is created by it. It is much more likely that the language chosen would become altered when used frequently by people of other nations.

But we should have to recognise that the choice would be a difficult one, raising questions of *amour-propre*, with some more serious grounds for hesitation as well. It would, therefore, be necessary for every state to enter on the discussions with the honest intention to accept, if necessary, a decision for another language than its own, and it would be especially important that we· should do so. And, if English were chosen, we should have to be ready, I feel, to accept some simplification of our spelling, even if this would be distasteful to people who are conservative in such matters, as I am myself.

Once the language had been decided on, it would be necessary for every state to ensure that it was to be the first living foreign language to be taught in its schools. Different states would have different ways of doing this. To most it would be a perfectly simple matter. To us, with our traditional belief in the independence of the school, whether in the state system or outside it, a belief which we should rightly not wish to abandon, it would be a more embarrassing problem. The study of some particular language, other than English, would have to be secured by strong official encouragement and by pointing out the necessity for it to the schools rather than by ministerial direction. One step would have to be taken in due course by all states, namely the decision that all higher administrative posts in the Civil Services would be open only to those who showed themselves to be proficient in the language. This would certainly cause its study to be generally adopted in British schools. In some twenty years throughout the Union the great majority of those who had received a secondary education which included the study of a language should be able to converse in reasonable comfort with men and women of other nations. But to attain this it would be necessary to raise the standard of teaching languages to the level now found in some parts of Europe, such as Holland or Hamburg, and this, I know is expecting a good deal.

A unity of culture in Europe would then for the first time become possible. It may seem strange to us to imagine that, if French, for example, were selected, we should normally speak in that language with a Dutchman or a Dane. But we may remember that in the days when Greek was used as a common language, it was perfectly natural for a native of Asia Minor to speak in it when he met an Egyptian, and that the same is true now with English when an educated Indian from a Southern State meets a native of Bengal.

I have said that it would be in many ways generally unfortunate if English were the language chosen. It would be particularly unfortunate for ourselves. We should miss the magnificent stimulus of having to learn another language, and no nation needs it more. For we must be ready to admit that as a nation we are bad linguists. In part, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that we have not felt it necessary to learn another language. We have been too isolated from Europe and we have found too many

people there who could speak English. We think we are too shy as a race to speak foreign languages well. Too often we are really too proud or too indolent. We feel that there is something almost unnatural or at least unusual in being able to speak more than one language. As Professor Collingwood wrote in his work on Roman Britain: ‘We are apt to think that bilingualism is a feat requiring a very high education and some initial gift for languages. But that’, he added, ‘is a mistake. There are and always have been plenty of countries where bilingualism is extremely common, and if you start learning languages early enough it seems to be no harder to learn two than one’. But then, many people in the British Isles are quite well aware of this, especially the Welsh.

Even if we are placed in the position to be able very often to talk to foreigners in our own tongue, we shall still need to improve our study of foreign languages. The problem is an immediate one. The British student who went to Paris or Gottingen could not expect to find all the lectures being given in English. We cannot take it for granted, of course, that the revolutionary procedure, which I have suggested, would pe adopted. And in any case we shall need to read the literature ~ other countries. All our protestations that we mean to take the idea of a European Union seriously will mean nothing if we are not prepared to make the effort required to be able to understand the people of other nations and to make them understand us. We must recognise the fact that for a long time we have been slipping back. Lytton Strachey told a story of how his grandfather, Edward Strachey, once travelled to Paris with Carlyle, before the days of railways, in carriage and how at their destination the postilion asked Edward Strachey for a tip. The reply was a curt refusal, followed by the words, ‘*Vous avez drivé devilish slow*’. ‘Fifty years earlier’ Lytton Strachey said, ‘a cultivated Englishman would have ‘piqued himself upon answering the postilion in the idiom and accent of Paris’.

As far as our education is concerned, the situation has recently become much worse. Fifteen years ago it ceased to be necessary for a boy or girl to pass in a foreign language in order to obtain a School Certificate, the examination which largely determines the curriculum of secondary education in this country. As far as I know, in the discussions on the new plans for examinations, which have now been concluded, it never occurred to anyone to reverse this decision. A very large proportion, perhaps the majority, of the boys and girls who now make science their special subject at school learn no foreign language, once they have secured their entry into a university. We talk glibly of the internationalism of science and then make it impossible by cutting ourselves off from conversation with the scientists of other countries. It is quite as absurd to suppose that, without taking the trouble to learn foreign languages, we shall be able to contribute to the cultural unity of Europe.