

'Championing the value of languages and linguists'

– an interview with Baroness Jean Coussins MA HonFCIL

'Movers and Shakers' is a series of interviews with the interpreting profession's leading lights.

Baroness Coussins was appointed as a Crossbench Peer in the House of Lords in 2007. She co-chairs the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages and sits on the EU Select Committee Sub-Committee on External Affairs. She is Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the United Nations and takes an active interest in human rights and corporate responsibility, as well as a range of issues connected with languages. And she is President of Speak to the Future (the national campaign for languages).



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She is also Vice-President of the Chartered Institute of Linguists. After studying modern languages (Spanish and French) at Newnham College, Cambridge, Baroness Coussins worked for several

national and international NGOs, an education authority and the Commission for Racial Equality, before becoming CEO of The Portman Group (1996-2006). She currently works as an independent non-executive adviser on corporate responsibility to various companies.

Where did your love of languages come from? Why did you elect to champion languages?

I was fascinated by languages from the moment I started learning French and Latin aged 10 or 11. My fate was sealed when I first tried using French in real life. I was aged

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11 and on a day trip to Boulogne. I went into a patisserie and bought a cake and came out shouting 'It works!' I was hooked on the idea of being able to communicate with other people in their own language and could sense doors opening and horizons broadening. I did French, German and Latin at O-level, Latin and French at A-level, and Spanish and French at university. Over the past year, I've been learning Arabic at the UCL Centre for Languages and International Education (CLIE).

When I came into the House of Lords in 2007, I noticed that there wasn't an all-party group on modern languages and so I set one up. The UK needs better policies on learning and using other languages – from primary school right through to higher education (HE) and the workplace – and I'm happy to be in a position to help champion languages and linguists.

What progress has been made since the publication of Professor Worton's 'Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England' in October 2009?

The opposite of progress! Since 2000, more than 40 universities have closed their modern languages departments and degree courses. Even though use of university language centres has increased, this does not compensate, as the users and purpose of courses run at these centres are quite different from those of modern languages departments. We need both.

Has the closure of modern languages departments in universities been halted/slowed?

No. As previously outlined, quite the reverse. Ulster is the latest university to close its Modern Foreign Languages department. It did this just a few weeks ago. The



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most critical closures of relevance to your readers, however, are the University of Westminster's closure of its MA in Interpreting and Salford University's closure of its entire languages department. Both this course and department were target recruitment grounds for interpreters and translators for the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN).

Have government communications around languages improved? Is there any evidence of ministers talking about languages in terms of them being strategic subjects on a par with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects (we understand this is an objective of yours)?

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) have been designated "strategically important and vulnerable subjects" by the Higher Education Funding Council for England since 2005, and to that extent are on a par with STEM subjects. But it should not be a case of either/or for STEM and MFL subjects – we must have both. Ministers say a great many good things about languages, but it often seems like two steps forward, then three steps back as far as policy and practice are concerned. For example, making languages mandatory for Key Stage 2 (the legal term for the four years of schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales) is hugely welcome, but where are the teachers to come from?

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which requires students to take GCSEs in English, Maths, History/Geography, Sciences and a language, has certainly been a step in the right direction. Indeed, statistics indicate this has had a positive impact on the uptake of languages at Key Stage 4 (the legal term for the two years of school education which incorporate GCSEs, and other exams, in maintained schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) since its introduction. However, the Progress 8 assessment system that is being introduced as a new measure of school performance will make it possible for schools to report EBacc compliance without doing languages – and so we take a few steps backwards.

Is government and business waking up to the fact that language skills are valuable to the economy and a global labour market?

The evidence for this is mixed and contradictory. According to the Confederation of British Industry/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2012, almost 70% of

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businesses are dissatisfied with the language skills of British school-leavers and graduates, and so are forced to recruit from overseas. Yet in the 2014 edition of the same survey, only 6% of UK businesses said they regarded foreign language skills as essential when recruiting graduates. A British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) survey, published in 2012, identified that 96% of English exporters have no foreign language skills for the markets they serve, while an earlier BCC study highlighted that three-quarters of companies surveyed said they had missed or lost export sales, with a significant correlation between export success and linguistic ability. The link between linguistic skills and business success is further supported by a report made to UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) by James Foreman-Peck and Yi Wang of Cardiff University, in which they identified that the language deficit in the UK is costing the economy around £48 billion a year in lost contracts. In contrast, the Confederation of British Industry has also highlighted that exporters who proactively use language skills achieve on average 45% more sales.

Languages in primary schools are now statutory in England. Presumably this is a step in the right direction?

As previously stated, it's a case of two steps forward, and three backwards. In addition to the need for languages to be mandatory and language teachers in schools, we also need a proper system of communication between primary and secondary schools, so that when children transfer at age 11, the Year 7 teachers know what they've been learning and how far they've got with this. Otherwise, the risk is that the teachers start again from scratch and the children get bored and demotivated.

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You have raised the issue of the protection of interpreters and translators in conflict zones on a number of occasions in the House of Lords, drawing cross-party support from high profile figures including Lord Patten and Lord Ashdown. Can you tell us why this is such an important issue and about the current situation, particularly with looking after those interpreters who were employed by the UK armed forces in Afghanistan?

I am trying to get the Government to support a Resolution at the UN Security Council on the protection of civilian translators and interpreters working in conflict zones. A draft has been proposed by an international alliance of linguists' organisations, spearheaded by Red T, The International Federation of Translators, and others. There is a similar Resolution for the protection of journalists in conflict zones already, which got unanimous support in the Security Council, so I am optimistic about extending this to interpreters and translators. After all, they are even more vulnerable and their vulnerability goes on well after the conflict is over, as we have seen in the case of the Afghan interpreters. The UK has already received in excess of

170 Afghan interpreters and 400 of their immediate family members into the UK, and more are awaiting relocation. This is a good scheme as far as it goes, but I think more needs to be done for the interpreters who don't qualify for the official redundancy scheme but who are still on the receiving end of intimidation by the Taliban. ■