

Should One Nation Mean One Language?

France, 1794. With the Reign of Terror in full swing, France at war with every other major European power, and civil war raging in the western provinces, the deputies of the National Convention took the time to consider a matter of crucial importance; the language of their fellow citizens. At the time, the majority of the population of France spoke little or no French, communicating instead through regional languages and dialects. The Revolutionaries feared that without linguistic unity the fledgling French Republic would be lost beneath a wave of counter-revolution and foreign invasion.

The fears of these Revolutionaries offer some telling parallels with contemporary debates about the links between language and citizenship. Critics of mass immigration warn of dangerous, ghettoised minorities that threaten the cohesion and security of wider society. Migrants, they insist, must integrate themselves, above all by learning English. This is a favoured theme of the Prime Minister when discussing the issues surrounding immigration and citizenship, as seen in his recent comments on the language of immigrants, and especially Muslim women in the UK. The government plans to increase funding for schools teaching English to immigrants, but also require that those entering the country to live with their spouse learn English under threat of losing the right to remain in the UK. Cameron's desire to build an 'integrated and cohesive One Nation country' resonates with the views expressed over two hundred years ago in a very different context by Bertrand Barère, a member of the French National Convention and the ruling Committee of Public Safety in 1794, for whom linguistic diversity was a grave threat. By linking an ignorance of English to backwardness, patriarchal oppression of women and the threat of violent extremism, Cameron echoes Barère, who claimed that 'to leave citizens in ignorance of the national language is to betray the fatherland, it is to leave the stream of enlightenment poisoned or blocked in its path'.

Concerns about the linguistic unity of nations have a long and often murky past. Just like Cameron, the Revolutionaries sought to impose the use of their national language on those who did not speak it. As the abbé Henri Grégoire, Barère's colleague in the National Convention, remarked, the aim was to 'annihilate' other languages and 'universalise' French. Schools were the favoured means of achieving this, and primary school teachers were obliged to instruct their students in the national language. During the nineteenth century a variety of unpleasant measures were developed in French classrooms to ensure the language took hold, most notably the use of the infamous 'symbol', the French counterpart to the Welsh Not. This involved the use of a ticket, ribbon or other token, which would be given to the first child to speak in their native tongue. The student would keep this object, sometimes grasping it arm extended, until another child used the language and the token could be passed on, with a punishment distributed to whoever was left holding it at the end of the day. This practice was intended not only to make sure children practiced their French, but to impart a sense of shame in speaking one's native tongue, the use of which became a taboo equated with spitting in the regulations of some schools.

Throughout the nineteenth century and across Europe, nationalists pursued linguistic unity with similar vigour, and this has often manifested itself in state sponsored discrimination. Linguistic minorities, especially Polish speakers, in the second German *Reich* suffered under Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* during the last decades of the nineteenth century, experiences similar to those enduring Russification under the Tsars Alexander II and Alexander III at roughly the same time. As in

France this involved the imposition of the national language in schools, and also the restriction civic rights and freedoms for linguistic minorities.

This is not just about tolerance or intolerance of minorities; it also touches on questions of individual freedom and citizenship raised during the Revolution. Cameron insists that teaching English to immigrants is also about individual freedom, that without access to the common language individuals are denied access to the choices enjoyed by the majority. The abbé Grégoire's opposition to linguistic diversity in France during the Revolution had very similar roots. Grégoire feared that the interests and rights of ordinary people would never be recognised unless they could read and write enough French to participate in politics. As Grégoire explicitly recognised in his speech before the Convention in 1794, the collective rights of minorities to have their culture respected conflicted with the rights of individuals to participate fully in society. These individual rights could be secured only through the intervention of the state.

The UK today is not Revolutionary France, nor is it Tsarist Russia or Germany under Bismarck, but these historical experiences can illuminate our current debate about the relationship between language and citizenship. Perhaps most pertinently, it is worth observing that language policies have often not worked quite as politicians hoped. France only achieved a real degree of linguistic unification after WWII, revealing the limited ability of the state to impose its will in matters of language. Efforts under Napoleon to create a monolingual legal system were opposed by legal officials who continued to communicate with locals in regional languages in order to be understood. Grégoire, like many contemporaries, hoped that large scale conscription to the French speaking army would assimilate the rural population, but when veterans returned home they often returned also to the local dialect under pressure from families and lovers. Even the French school system, universal and free at primary level after 1881, was less important than urbanization and the development of transport links in the countryside. Discriminatory policies in Russia and Germany were often counter-productive, strengthening the appeal of minority identities and stimulating opposition and revolt. The history of language and state in Europe shows how the social and economic context influenced the linguistic choices of individuals far more than narrow interventions of the state.