

# The need for a Chief Government Linguist Speaking up for Languages.

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The creation of a Chief Government Linguist for the whole of the United Kingdom is needed to broaden cross-departmental cooperation on language policy.

## Background

The future of modern languages is at a pivotal point. The role and contribution of languages to the UK economy and society is both rich and varied. However there are concerns regarding the level of uptake in modern languages in schools and universities. These concerns are widespread and include:

- The need for language skills in the workforce, evidenced in a series of reports from employers and the APPG on Modern Languages.
- Lack of native English speakers in the translating and interpreting departments of the United Nations.
- Serious issues arising from inadequate language services in the criminal justice system and health system<sup>1</sup>.

Language issues are central to many of the key topics for the UK in a post-Brexit world:

- **Prosperity and well-being** - The economy is losing out on £48bn every year, or 3.5 % of GDP, in lost contracts because of a lack of language skills in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. 96% of English exporters had no foreign language ability for the markets they serve and the largest language deficits were for the fastest growing markets.<sup>3</sup>
- **International relations, diplomacy, security and defence** – A lack of joined up thinking is placing the security of the nation at risk and compromises diplomacy and international relations. For example Government communication, GCHQ, is struggling to recruit appropriately trained linguists in key languages.<sup>4</sup> This is potentially compromising our capability for intelligence gathering.
- **Education and training** - It is encouraging that the Department for Education has put a language in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc)<sup>5</sup> as a core subject and has recently launched a Centre of Excellence for Modern Languages and nine regional hubs. Scotland has a '1+2' policy and Wales a 'bilingual + 1' policy which is supported by the 'Global Futures' strategy. However, a broader cultural change is required in order to help schools and universities deliver an education strategy that changes the mind-set that the UK is 'bad' at languages and also that languages can only be learnt by educational high achievers. Languages should be for everyone, yet currently 20% of state schools dis-apply children from the statutory requirement from age 13. There is a misapprehension that languages are only for the brightest pupils.
- **Identity and social cohesion** - Languages enhance cultural capital and social cohesion in all parts of the UK. In the case of social cohesion, support for community languages (the languages of our immigrant communities) and indigenous languages (the Celtic languages and Scots/Ulster Scots) is crucial. England and Northern Ireland are lagging behind the situation in

<sup>1</sup> Manifesto for languages – Modern Languages All Party Parliamentary Group 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Baroness Jean Coussins, New Statesman 28/11/17.

<sup>3</sup> British Chamber of Commerce.

<sup>4</sup> PP5, The Value of Languages – University of Cambridge October 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a performance measure for schools, awarded when students secure a grade C or above at GCSE level across a core of five academic subjects.

Scotland and Wales, where the '1+2' and 'bilingual +1' policies represent a more coherent approach to both indigenous and community languages.

It is good that the "Government is 100% committed to restoring languages to their rightful place in the school's curriculum" and that they are committed to "ensuring every single pupil in the country has the opportunity to experience learning a second language to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures"<sup>6</sup>. However the Government need to go further and match policy with their rhetoric.

A Chief Government Linguist will work across a range of government departments, embedding languages in policy-making in a range of key areas.

### **What will the Chief Government Linguist do?**

The role of the Chief Government Linguist would be similar to the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. He or she would be a senior civil servant who would mobilize executive support and coordinate the embedding of languages in government policy across a range of departments. Such a role would require authority in order to be able to recommend operational decisions. They will be a champion for languages both within and outside government.

### **Why do we need a Chief Government Linguist?**

There is no Minister or official currently co-ordinating language policy development across Government. This is problematic because:

- Policy formulation in the case of languages will often impact across departments and language policy development is currently fractured or considered as important only within Education.
- The role of languages is not being considered when addressing key policy areas. For example there have been no language impact assessments undertaken on key government flagship policies such as their industrial strategy. A Chief Government Linguist would help ensure coordination across government departments and highlight how languages are vital to key policy issues.

To have a focal point and advocate for languages across government would create better government. This would be the role of the Chief Government Linguist.

### **What are the costs and benefits?**

We see this as a senior civil service role and believe it would deliver an overall return in terms of providing guidance on the strategic embedding of languages across government. The Chief Government Linguist's expertise would help equip the UK for future international trade, diplomacy and security engagement. There is scope for further discussion around the practical impact of this role further to ensure it adds value and helps deliver better government.

### **Future action**

The creation of a Chief Government Linguist<sup>7</sup> will help communicate clearly and simply the value of languages for the health of the nation. We will be calling on the research community to engage with the relevant stakeholders to raise this up the agenda to make this ambition a reality.

### **For further information contact:**

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Gibb Minister of State for Schools. Speech at the German Embassy, 11 July 2012.

<sup>7</sup> PP23 The Value of Languages – University of Cambridge October 2015.

**Open World Research Initiative (OWRI)** – the Arts and Humanities Research Council has invested £16 million in four major research programmes that will help demonstrate the value of modern languages in an increasingly globalised research environment. These projects will help showcase the crucial role that languages play, not just within arts and humanities but also on a wider scale in relation to key contemporary issues.