

*Part of the mission of The Social Contract is to bring to our readers some of the cogent items that have been written in previous years, the message of which is still valuable and applicable to the issues under consideration. The following piece by Henry Catto was written as a guest "My Turn" column for Newsweek, December 1, 1980, and is reprinted by permission. Mr. Catto is the current Director of the United States Information Agency. He has served several distinguished posts in government including ambassador to El Salvador and to the Court of St. James's.*

## OUR LANGUAGE BARRIERS

By Henry E. Catto, Jr.

By the end of the next decade it is entirely possible that the United States will once again confront the fateful choice it faced in 1860: schism or civil war. The cause this time will be language, and the crisis will have resulted in no small measure from government policy.

Two recent events, coming with dramatic simultaneity, foreshadow this bleak future. The separatist election in Quebec showed the grim danger of two competing languages within one nation. And the Spanish armada of Cubans fleeing their wretched homeland is a clear reminder of what is happening to us. Unfortunately, like some vague vatic dream, the memory will fade and we will do nothing to avert the problem until it is too late.

The American tradition has been, of course, for each wave of immigrants to put aside its language, save for special occasions, and learn English. But in the mid 1960s, understandably anxious to overcome the problems of minorities, the Federal government in its zeal unwisely abandoned this tradition.

The beginning of it all was innocuous enough. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was amended by a \$7.5 million pilot program that would allow a Spanish-speaking student to be taught his basics in Spanish; as his English improved, he would switch into it and not lag behind his peers.

**Brainchild:** In 1967 I testified in favor of this project before Sen. Ralph Yarborough's subcommittee. The bill was the brainchild of liberal Democrats. Its sponsors thought the favorable opinion of a Spanish-speaking South Texas Republican such as myself would be helpful. Aware of the benefits of being bilingual, I obliged. I know from experience that command of more than one tongue is enormously useful. In commerce, government, or society in general, multilingualism is a helpful tool and a mark of sophistication. The trend in America away from foreign-language study is a cause for legitimate concern. I have, however, come sorely to regret having testified for the pilot program; for, in the way of things governmental, the winsome babe has, in its maturity, turned monstrous.

The problem started in the courts. In 1974, in the case of *Lau v. Nichols*, the Supreme Court ruled that Chinese-speaking students in San Francisco were

being discriminated against by being taught in English. It ordered relief but did not specify what form the relief should take. The office of Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare could have gone two ways to implement the decision: increase special English instruction or impose teaching in Chinese. With an unerring instinct for disaster, it chose the latter. Consider some of the results.

First, and most bizarre, students now have the *right* to be taught not only in Chinese or Spanish, but also in Aleut, Navajo, Apache, Japanese, Yiddish, Russian, Tagalog, or any of 60-odd additional tongues.

Second, the cost of the program, borne on the wings of the *Lau* decision, has soared. In 1981 it is projected to be \$192 million, a beautiful example of how governmental acorns grow. Thus far, the program has cost \$942,063,000.

Third, school districts (some 300 of them throughout the nation) which do not satisfactorily comply with these guidelines face a cutoff of vital federal funds. A "bilingual/bicultural" program is mandatory if there are twenty or more students of similar linguistic background in a district. There is no compelling law of the land in this loss of local control over local education. There are only proposed Department of Education regulations. Congress, in spite of the perversion of its idea, docilely continues to provide the funding which makes the travesty possible.

Finally, and not surprisingly, a vocal constituency in defense of the status quo has sprung up. The principal defenders are mostly Hispanics, a healthy sprinkling of the New Left reformers and teachers' organizations for whom bilingualism provides the twin treats of a cause perceived as progressive to fight for and thousands of teaching jobs. The whole matter reached the height of absurdity recently when the New Jersey teachers' lobby went to court to overturn a state rule requiring that teachers in bilingual programs be able to speak English. The New Jersey Education Association thought this rule to be racist, and it was clearly inconvenient for many teachers who could not speak English. As the *New York Times* tut-tutted editorially,

bilingual is bilingual: "...it is one thing for any group to choose to lead a bilingual life, quite another for it to

try to turn America into a bilingual society." The Federal court in Trenton fortunately ruled for inconvenience and upheld the state.

**Magnet:** Is there no way to turn the tide? Probably not. Floods of illegal immigrants continue to pour in from Mexico, Central America and South America. While some of these Spanish-speakers are dispersed throughout the country, many remain concentrated near ports of entry — in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. For these people, assimilation in the historical tradition is difficult. One can listen to Spanish radio, watch Spanish TV and even vote in Spanish. Add education in Spanish as a right, and the melting pot principle is in danger. Indeed, Dr. Josue Gonzalez, head of the Department of Education's bilingual program, is publicly on record as welcoming its end.

Here then are the ingredients: huge numbers of Spanish-speakers resident in the Southwest, supplemented by uncontrolled immigration; the linguistic magnet of Mexico, and the restless hunger of politicians for votes. Add a government policy whose results inevitably weaken the absolutely basic social cement of language (a policy which, incidentally, condescendingly implies that the Spanish-speaker, unlike the Italian, Swede, or Russian before him, cannot "hack it" in English without special help). The result: trouble. One nation indivisible? Don't count on it. ■