

Remarks of John Hume MP, MEP
to the Conference to establish
THE EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LESSER USED LANGUAGES
at the National Language Centre for Wales
North Gwrtheyrn, 10-12 November 1989

May I begin by congratulating the organisers of this Conference on their vision and initiative in establishing a European Centre for Lesser Used Languages here in Wales. This conference, the vision which you have of a European Centre and the many other Conferences on lesser used languages which are taking place in recent times all over Europe, are evidence of the new life and energy which are invigorating our various language movements. Lesser Used Languages are now emphatically on the European agenda.

This new life and vigour which I speak of bears out the thesis which I have put forward before, that the European Community has created an entirely new dynamic in relation to language difference. The Community is a much more benevolent environment for lesser used languages than the nation state, precisely because it is a polyglot polycultural Community. Your concept of a European Centre for Lesser Used Languages is therefore entirely appropriate because it will seek to address minority language issues in the right context.

The European context is the strongest possible context within which to deal with the problems and prospects of lesser used languages. Multilingualism is commonplace in Europe. In fact a whole industry has grown up around the institution of the European Community employing hundreds of people in interpretation, translation, and the development of new

communication technologies geared for these services.

Language difference is becoming less and less of a problem because of the availability of such services and technologies.

Secondly, in the European context devotees of lesser used languages are no longer in the position of small isolated Communities struggling against the cultural imperialism of centralised and largely homogeneous nation states. About thirty million citizens of the European Community speak lesser used languages. They are scattered through almost every member state. They are a large and powerful lobby within the European Community as a whole, and they are becoming increasingly organised on a European basis.

In fact the European Parliament has devoted a considerable amount of energy and time to the issue of minority languages following an initial resolution by myself and others which led to the Arfe Report. An intergroup of MEPs has been

formed comprising representatives from all the political groups in the Parliament, and there have been a number of promising meetings with the European Commission. The energy which the members of that intergroup are displaying and the enthusiasm which they have for the cause of minority languages generally and not just their own, is a very powerful force. The formation of the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages is a consequence of our initiatives, and it has become the driving force in the process of forging links between language activists all over Europe. I have witnessed the excitement and the fresh hope of such language activists as they become involved in this European movement. They find that they can escape from the suffocation of the dominant culture in their state, and take their place with a new self assurance in the social economic cultural and technological dimensions of late 20th century Europe.

A further strength of the European lobby for lesser used languages is that the experience and predicament of those languages is so similar, regardless of the political context, all over Europe. Language activists are classically preoccupied with the place of their language in the education system, the media, public administration and the economic sphere. The problem caused by industrialisation, tourism, the migration of native speakers and the predominance of the major language media are common to all the lesser used languages. In a more fundamental way, language activists are concerned with the link between language and the sense of identity of their people, deriving from the whole of their cultural inheritance, and the perceived need for a sense of continuity, for a preservation of a certain sense of values and a distinct way of life.

You may ask how the common experience of all these problems is a source of strength. It is precisely that, because these issues are inextricably interwoven with the whole issue of regional

policy in Europe, and the question of what kind of Europe it is that we want. In regard to this particular question the whole political and cultural climate has changed in Europe in the last twenty years. I believe that the tide is now with those of us who believe in a "Europe of the Regions", a Europe which cherishes and preserves its region with all of their rich cultural diversity. The problems which have come to be associated with centralised development, the drift to the cities, the desertification of rural areas, the overexpansion of already swollen cities, the problems of urban decay, and the breakdown of social order are so acute that there is general acceptance of the need to reverse that process. There is a growing awareness of the need to preserve traditional communities as the very basis upon which civilised society rests. And if we are to do that then we must adopt policies which preserve and strengthen existing and stable regional societies. Such policies cannot simply be ordained by Brussels or properly organised by national governments. We need much more regional autonomy so that people in the regions can design, shape and

implement the necessary programmes themselves, in light of, their own perceptions, needs and aspirations.

Therefore the cultural dimension of regional policy are inextricably interwoven, with social political and economic issues. You may ask is this approach not bound to lead to disunity? Is it not flying in the face of the current movement towards European integration? On the contrary, I believe that the real advocates of European integration and unity are those of us who believe in a Europe united in all the richness of its diversity. We want a Europe which is much more comprehensive in its unity because it values and preserves regional and cultural diversity while working for a convergence of living standards and of economic, social and cultural rights.

And when we look to see who are the opponents of European unity, we find that we are looking at the old enemy - the

proponents of the centralised bureaucratic nation state.

Mrs Thatcher is much given to scare-mongering about a united Europe with identikit citizens. In fact it is she and people like her who wish to develop a Europe of the nation states who are the real proponents of centralism and bureaucratic control.

It may seem a paradox to some that I see in the European community a new and refreshing context within which lesser used languages can grow and flourish, at a time when the Community is grappling with enormous economic, social and political problems. Some may be sceptical of my view that the process of European integration provides us with a more benevolent context in which to strengthen minority cultures. However I believe strongly that our previous efforts to protect and promote our languages in the narrow context of the nation state ensured that they would lose out to the major languages, because our efforts were seen as divisive, separatist and even subversive.

In the broader European context our languages can find the recognition of their real linguistic and cultural value. In this setting we will be freed from inhibitions about being perceived as narrow, inward-looking, nationalistic or anachronistic - considerations which have inhibited many people in the past who have had a genuine personal attachment to their own native tongue.