

What Does the Media Think of Us? (Part 2)

by Steven Hunt

On 1st January 2014 Sky News reported on the upsurge in interest in offering Latin to students at primary and secondary level occasioned by the award of grants from the London Excellence Fund by Boris Johnson, Mayor of London. No doubt touching base with the charity Classics For All to find people they could interview, the Sky News team devoted a good ten minutes to the topic, sending their correspondent hotfoot to North Norfolk, tracking down several respondents who could give the gen on why students should or should not study Latin, and even engaging in a live Skype session with Mary Beard in her own drawing room. A transcript of this news item is given on the opposite page.

Charlotte Goddard last drew our attention to a BBC News article about the spread of Latin in JCT 28 (2013), and pointed out the wariness with which the interviewers seem to approach the study of Latin: it was almost as if their own personal experiences, or those which they had picked up from somewhere else, were still managing to colour their views. Worse, such prejudice was being repeated, without question, throughout the programme.

This newscast was generally much more positive – at least at the start. The correspondent had gone out of her way to find people who spoke enthusiastically about the students’ learning experiences and about what Latin was offering to them. A number of helpful statistics suggested that the study of Latin was on the rise again. Only one respondent represented a negative view and his suggestion that Latin had no resonance with students of today seemed obviously countered by what we could see and hear throughout the rest of the item. But having Ann Widdecombe regale us with New Year’s greetings in Latin

does not do *The Cause* a huge amount of good, I suspect. I cannot be the only one concerned that she joins our other figureheads Boris Johnson and Michael Gove himself.

In the final interview with Mary Beard the news presenter reverted to the Government’s obsession with vocational learning: “Why not learn something which might be really useful for today’s world. How about Mandarin?” He sarcastically suggested “This all very well for the wonderful corridors around Cambridge” and condemned Latin as “elitist.” The usual counter arguments seemed to fall on deaf ears, and the end of the item gave the impression that the news presenter was not wholly convinced, thereby undoing much of the good news at the start of the item. It seems to me at least that we need to find a way to make what we do appear easier-to-swallow: a better set of sound-bites, if you like. Perhaps a place to start every time would be to report that the study of Latin is *not just* the study of Latin grammar.

Latin in North Norfolk: Sky News, 1st January 2014

Newscaster: Latin. Boris Johnson has pledged a quarter of a million pounds to encourage schools to teach it. Emma Birchley went to find out why.

[Over film of primary school pupils dressed in replica Roman clothes and speaking Latin]

Male pupil: *salve*, Helena.

Female pupil: *salve*, Marcus.

Male pupil: *donum tibi habeo*.

Emma Birchley: *[voice over]* It’s not what

you’d expect in a remote corner of Norfolk. Eight and nine year olds telling the tale of a Roman birthday party, in Latin.

[Over film of secondary school students in classroom being taught by their teacher]

Emma Birchley: *[voice over]* The subject is also being taught to older children down the road in North Walsham. In fact 20 schools in the county are involved. State, not private, with pupils from all backgrounds. And there’s a push to replicate what’s happening here across the country.

[Cut to film of Jane Maguire, who co-ordinates the North Norfolk Latin Cluster]

Jane Maguire: It gives them the ability to understand quite hard words in English – to interpret them through their knowledge of Latin. It gives them an understanding of the grammatical structure of a language which helps them when they come to learn a modern foreign language. And it opens up the whole legacy of the Roman Empire that is still all around us.

[Over film of the pupils in the primary school]

Emma Birchley: *[voice over]* It’s a view shared by the Department for Education. All seven year olds will learn a foreign language starting from September and Latin and Ancient Greek are included as options. But the only way these schools have been able to offer Latin has been grants from the charity *Classics for All*.

Existing school teachers are being trained to teach Latin lessons by the charity. It’s the only way they can deal quickly with falling numbers as up to 70 classics teachers are retiring each year while only 25 are emerging from university to replace them.

[Cut to film of Boris Johnsonⁱⁱ in a lesson in a secondary school]

Emma Birchley: [voice over] The Mayor of London recently pledged a quarter of a million pounds so that children in the most deprived parts of the capital could learn Latin. And the subject certainly has plenty of famous backers.

[Cut to film of Anne Widdecombeⁱⁱⁱ]

Ann Widdecombe: The beauty of Latin is it is so precise and so expressive and its literature can only really be appreciated in its original form. My Latin now is extremely rusty but I can still say 'Happy New Year! *annum faustum omnibus vobis!*'

Emma Birchley: [voice over] But there are those who argue that the language is dead.

[Cut to film of Francis Gilbert, author^{iv}]

Francis Gilbert: The vast majority of children find Latin completely removed from their lives. It's completely irrelevant to who they are. Often it's very, very difficult to present it in an energetic and enthusiastic way.

[Cut to film of Emma Birchley]

Emma Birchley: But in the past two years the number of pupils taking the subject at GCSE has risen by 9%.

[Cut to film of two secondary school students at North Walsham High School, Norfolk]

Male student: I wasn't very keen on it because I wasn't very interested. But I'm really good at it now and I like it.

Female student: I think we should bother because it really helps with your English and because it helps you learn.

[Cut to film of Emma Birchley]

Emma Birchley: More grants are out there to be had. The schools' biggest challenge may be fitting another subject into their already busy timetables.

[Cut to the Sky News Studio]

Newscaster: We can talk to Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at Cambridge University. Good afternoon to you. Now, why learn Latin?

[Cut to film of Mary Beard via video link]

Mary Beard: Hello. There are two reasons. It's a fantastically empowering language. I mean sometimes in little ways - like it's great to know why Manchester is called Manchester. But also as one of the people on your film was saying; it really helps to get to grips with how language works and to think about how communication and grammar and linguistic structures operate. And I think it is just as important to know how language works as it is to know how numbers work or the laws of physics work. But I think there's more to it than that and one of the obvious things is that if you go on with the language - if these kids at primary school can continue - they can read some of the most influential works of literature which have ever been written in the original. I mean half of western culture - Dante, Shakespeare, Ted Hughes, Ezra Pound, TS Elliott - have been, in a way, in a conversation with works written in Latin - Virgil, Ovid. And if you can really get to grips with that you get a most amazing insight into what makes western culture western.

Newscaster: Why not learn something which might be really useful for today's world. How about Mandarin?

Mary Beard: I don't think anyone is saying that everyone should learn Latin, instead of all those other languages. But what is very important about Latin is what might seem at first sight to be its disadvantage: that you don't have to speak it. You don't have to ask for a pizza in it, you don't have to ask the way to the cathedral or the way to the swimming pool. Now what that means is you go directly into how a language and grammar and linguistic structures operate, without all that very interesting noise. So it's a wonderful adjunct to those other languages. And I think that's what's important. And when people say, "Oh! But no-one speaks Latin!" - thank heavens they don't, really! Because Latin and how you learn Latin is a huge help; and it really is eye-opening for the structures of language wherever you find them.

Newscaster: Forgive me, but this all very well for the wonderful corridors around Cambridge, but many people are saying, many students - even those presenting themselves at university - can barely speak. They certainly can't write very

good English. Isn't it all rather elitist?

Mary Beard: Well, I think there are two things you can say to this. One is actually learning Latin is a huge help and a huge support in thinking about how you write your own language. What's become really important recently is the idea that Latin isn't just for toffs. And the initiatives that *Classics for All* are taking is to say that this is a great subject - there have been several decades - and probably centuries - when it has been the privilege of the rich to learn it. Well, let's get rid of that, and say that it's a worthwhile subject. Let everyone have a go, who wants to learn it. We all know that the Romans aren't just for the privileged - loads of people enjoyed *Gladiator* and *Asterix* and *Up Pompeii* and all those popular representations of Rome. Let's give everyone a chance to learn Latin and not just those whose mums and dads can pay for it.

Newscaster: Thank you very much, Professor Mary Beard.

Steven Hunt

References

ⁱ Emma Birchley, Sky News East of England correspondent.

ⁱⁱ Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, recently announced his intention to support more teaching of Classical subjects in state-maintained schools in London. According to the London Evening Standard newspaper, 'Mr Johnson claimed the best schools in the capital were ones where children were taught classical history and languages as well as English grammar...[He went on to say]: "Many schools in London are doing tremendous work, and have high expectations of their students. They are not afraid of teaching the 'crunchy subjects' like maths, languages and sciences, or putting their children on a meaty diet of reading the classics or learning grammar.'" London Evening Standard, 11 February 2013, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/mayor/mayor-boris-johnson-launches-24m-fund-to-turbocharge-londons-teachers-8489466.html>, accessed 28th January 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Widdecombe, Member of Parliament 1997-2010.

^{iv} Francis Gilbert, teacher and author of *Working the System: How to Get the Best State Education for Your Child*. London: Short Books Ltd (2009).