

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING LANGUAGES POLICY

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Introduction

This paper sets out to trace the attempt made by the New Zealand government to develop a comprehensive languages policy during the early part of the 1990s. The early history of the National Languages Policy Project is reviewed and the current status of the discussion document *Aotearoa: Speaking for ourselves* is examined. Two explanations for the failure of the policy project to develop into a policy are presented and an assessment of the influence that the document has had is offered. The paper argues that while there have been many developments in languages in recent years, language issues would still benefit from inclusion in a comprehensive languages policy which would state, as a basic principle, the country's commitment to language diversity. The paper concludes with some suggestions for possible future action.

The early history of the National Languages Policy Project

The early stages of the movement towards the development of a national languages policy document are recorded by Peddie (1989) who presents the history of the movement through a comparative study with languages policy developments in Victoria, Australia (1991, 1993). Kaplan (1993) comments on his experience as a consultant to the New Zealand Ministry of Education on the Languages Policy Project and reflects on the languages situation in New Zealand. As the Languages Policy Project began to show few signs of producing a policy, Peddie (1994) asked, "Why are we waiting?" while Benton (1994) stated that while some activity had taken place in government in languages development, "The grand plan has yet to be announced" (Benton, 1994:161).

At the First National Conference on Community Languages and English for Speakers of other Languages in Wellington in 1988, a group with representatives from a broad range of languages related areas was established to develop proposals for a national languages policy. A draft document entitled, *Towards a national languages policy*, was developed at a seminar held in Auckland and produced in bilingual format in September 1989 (Peddie 1991:16-18).

The National Languages Policy Secretariat produced a definition of a languages policy which is still useful. The Secretariat defined a national languages policy as:

A set of nationally agreed principles which enables decision makers and the community to make choices about language issues in a rational, comprehensive balanced way. The policy should form the basis for the allocation of resources to meet the needs of all sections of the community.

(National Languages Policy Secretariat, 1989:3)

The Secretariat made representation to the Minister of Education in 1989 and early in 1990; and in August 1990, at the Second National Conference on Community Languages and English for Speakers of Other Languages in Wellington, the Associate Minister of Education delivered a speech on behalf of the Minister of Education in which he announced that the government had agreed to develop and fund a national languages policy project.

The Minister acknowledged that, until that time, issues associated with languages in New Zealand had been dealt with in an "ad hoc way." The establishment of a nationally constituted set of languages guidelines would,

guarantee the coordination of efforts, require the sharing of information, and encourage the sharing of resources. It would allow for forward planning across a range of sectors and ensure a more effective deployment of resources.

(Goff, 1990:8)

It is interesting to note that the Minister defined the diversity of language and culture as a "strength for New Zealand". He emphasised the importance of the revitalisation of te reo Māori and the need for coordinated planning between government departments, citing eight ministries with an interest in, and responsibility for, policies relating to languages. Under a national languages policy, for example, the Ministry of External Relations and Trade, the New Zealand Immigration Service and the Ministry of Education would promote coordinated planning "to ensure harmony between the country's immigration and education policies relating to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages" (Goff, 1990:9). It was also recognised that interdepartmental cooperation would be required to ensure sufficient numbers were acquiring foreign languages skills. The Minister stated that the government's initiative should, in some ways, parallel the successful national languages policy developments in Australia where Jo Lo Bianco had been appointed as a special consultant to the Minister of Education and had published the Australian National Languages Policy in 1987. Despite a change of government in October 1990, further representations from the Secretariat helped to ensure that the incoming National Government made a commitment to the Languages Policy Project. Dr Jeffrey Waite was appointed to develop the policy and he reported to the Minister of Education on schedule in December 1991.

The Waite Report was finally released in June 1992 in two parts with a Foreword by the Minister of Education under the title, *Aotearoa: Speaking for ourselves*. A

discussion on the development of a New Zealand languages policy. *Aotearoa* covered a wide range of languages related issues and Waite identified six main priorities in the Overview. The priorities identified were: the revitalisation of the Maori language; second chance literacy; children's ESL and first language maintenance; adult ESL; national capabilities in international languages, and provision of services in languages other than English.

Submissions on *Aotearoa* were received by 1 October 1992, analysed and a report was sent to the Minister in late 1992. 129 submissions were received, along with 94 duplicates from a TESOL organisation and 349 signatures on a petition regarding Latin. Peddie reports that, "the Ministry analyst is reported to have concluded that many of the results did not appear to be statistically significant" (Peddie 1993:30).

Language professionals believed that the Waite Report was likely to be the foundation of a policy but no formal announcement of a national languages policy was made. The Minister of Education stated in a letter of 1 April 1993 to Roger Peddie of the University of Auckland that, "the New Zealand Languages Policy Project is currently on the work programme for the Ministry of Education" but with "no projected date for the announcement of new policy in this area" (Peddie, 1993:30). Since then, there has been no official statement from the Ministry about the status of the Waite Report or the development of a comprehensive policy for languages.

The current status of the National Languages Policy Project

Clarification on the status of the Waite Report was sought by the writer from the Ministry of Education. In November 1995, the writer received a letter from the Ministry which stated that, "the discussion document, *Aotearoa: Speaking for ourselves*, presented issues to be taken into account in the formulation of a national languages policy in New Zealand" (Acting Group Manager, Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 10 November, 1995). Submissions to the Ministry revealed, "a high level of support for the contents of the report but little support for an interdepartmental initiative to develop a national languages policy under the coordination of Ministry of Education". A high level of support had been received for priority to be given to Maori language; the benefits of bilingualism had received "a high level of acknowledgement" as had the study of another language as part of the common curriculum (Acting Group Manager, Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 10 November, 1995). Support had been expressed for the principle of first language maintenance alongside second language learning and concern had been stated about the adequacy of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) resources for school aged children and adults. The letter went on to state that the Minister of Education had agreed that the report and the responses would be used as "key resources" to inform the Ministry's language education policy development work

(Acting Group Manager, Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 10 November, 1995).

Further clarification about the status of the Waite Report was received by obtaining a copy of the Ministry of Education Briefing Paper, dated 3 April, 1995, entitled, *New Zealand Languages Policy: An update*. The paper refers to a key decision that was made by the Minister of Education in May 1993 when he replaced the New Zealand Languages Policy Project on the Ministry of Education's Work Plan with three discrete policy developments. The report states that policy development focused on selected areas of language education and policy. As well as the work being done to increase te reo Māori, the policy priority areas were to be ESOL, Asia 2000 and second language learning. In summary, the Ministry of Education claimed that there was no clear mandate for a comprehensive languages policy and replaced the National Languages Policy Project with separate policy developments. What remains of the New Zealand Languages Policy Project and the initiative to develop a comprehensive languages policy is now described by the Ministry of Education as a "languages-in-education policy" with discrete policy developments.

Why did the Languages Policy Project fail?

An explanation for the failure of government to produce a comprehensive languages policy is required. Two main theories relating to the project's failure are proposed here. The first relates to the way in which the project was designed and managed. The second relates to the political and economic context in which the project was developed and the changes that were taking place in the reform of the state sector at that time.

Project design

Languages policy developments in New Zealand have been strongly influenced by policy developments in Australia. However, there were significant differences between the context in which Jo Lo Bianco developed the Australian Languages Policy and the task that faced Jeffrey Waite when he undertook to develop a New Zealand policy.

Languages policy development in Australia came about as a result on considerable public debate and bi-partisan Senate consultation prior to the actual writing of the policy by Lo Bianco. The Senate Standing Committee on Education and Arts met for two and a half years, held public meetings and received 420 written submissions and documents from individuals and organisations. The policy, made public in October 1984, contained many recommendations for government action (Senate Standing Committee, 1984). When the Minister of Education commissioned Lo Bianco to prepare a national languages policy, he had the benefit of a range of policy initiatives and documents on which he could draw. Ozolins (1993) reports that, "although the Lo Bianco report on National Policy on Languages... was produced in the relatively short

period of five months, it was able to take advantage of what was by now an impressive range of languages policy initiatives and documents" (Ozolins, 1993:243). In contrast, the impetus for policy development in New Zealand was confined to a small number of people mainly in the education sector. Although the group was a representative coalition of interested parties, the pressure for a national policy on languages was still largely confined to particular interest groups within education.

In an interview with the writer in August 1995, Jeffrey Waite described the two years between the conferences of 1988 and 1990 as "lost years" when other people at different levels of society and government should have become involved in the project. He explained that the expectation was that he would produce a policy statement just as Lo Bianco had for Australia. However, Waite described himself as "only one person, a small part of the kind of process that the Senate (in Australia) carried out and that Jo Lo Bianco had been through" (J. Waite, personal communication, 31 August, 1995). Waite compared the lack of data available to him with the situation in Australia where "people knew a lot more about what they wanted, and the kind of information that we didn't have had already been gathered" (J. Waite, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

In Australia, there is not only much better data available about languages issues but there appears to be a much greater awareness of languages issues than in New Zealand. Kaplan (1993) described the languages situation in New Zealand as "extremely difficult" because "there is virtually no recent data available". Kaplan recognised New Zealand as a multilingual/multi-cultural community but "language receives insufficient attention in any sector of the society." He also noted that while there is "some hostility to language issues in the population, the government there appears to be profoundly disinterested" (Kaplan, 1993:5).

There also appears to have been a lack of definition of what was expected of the Project Manager. While Waite thought in the early stages that he was supposed to be writing a languages policy, he came to realise that only governments make policy. The document *Aotearoa* is not a policy prescription. In Waite's words, "It ended up as a discussion or a canvassing of the kinds of issues that you would have to look at and consider in deriving a language policy" (J. Waite, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

The progress of the project also reveals something of the difficulties of interdepartmental cooperation within government. The New Zealand Languages Policy Project was designed not only to address languages issues in education but also to encompass languages issues across a wide spectrum of activity and therefore interdepartmental cooperation was essential. However, according to Waite, the process was not well supported by other departments. At least part of the reason for this was because the project was placed within the Ministry of Education and the project was

regarded by other departments as essentially a Ministry of Education policy development. "State Services Commission or Treasury personnel thought they were all contributing to an education policy rather than to a government national policy" (J. Waite, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

The difficulties that would result from placing the policy project within the Ministry of Education had been predicted by Kaplan (1990). Kaplan makes the useful distinction between languages planning and languages-in-education planning. He sees languages planning as the function of central government. Once a central government had developed and adopted a policy on languages, it would then resource the education sector to implement a languages-in-education policy. In 1990, he warned that New Zealand's central government was about to "relegate the solution of the language problem to the education sector." He saw the National Languages Policy Project initiative as being a national issue and not solely the concern of the Ministry of Education. In his final report to the Ministry of Education (1993) Kaplan recommended that "the position dealing with the languages policy process be separated as soon as possible from the Ministry of Education" (1993:10).

The political context and state sector reforms

The second possible explanation for the failure of the Languages Policy Project lies in the political and economic reforms of the period. Language planning and languages policy development are often seen in the literature as human resource issues requiring long term planning, widespread consultation and interdepartmental involvement at government level. Involvement by government is seen as central to the development of policy. Eastman (1987) states:

There are no instances of the establishment of a languages policy without the guidance of at least an implicit form of planning agency or academy. No languages policy can successfully be implemented without the support of an authoritative body... by far the most common form of authority involved in developing languages policy is the government.

(Eastman, 1987:33)

It is important therefore, to place the National Languages Policy Project within a political and historical context. During the 1980s, New Zealand underwent extensive reforms of the public sector aimed at moving from a public service culture to one of public management with an emphasis on economy and efficiency, based on private sector methods and techniques (Mascarenhas, 1993). Deregulation, privatisation, user pays and contracting out were introduced and in education the market-oriented approach has seen extensive devolution of responsibilities to individual institutions. Education has been subjected to market forces, and there has been a change in the function of central government's role in education planning with an increase in the power of the minister to make policy. The reforms introduced in the 1980s coincided with the

emergence of a particular type of neo-conservatism, characterised by a commitment to a free market economy which the New Right claimed to be preferable to the state for allocating scarce public resources (Peters, Marshall and Massey, 1994).

The New Zealand Department of Education was abolished in 1989 and a new Ministry of Education created. A significant cultural change ensued. State sector managers were given greater authority and responsibility to take decisions and were to be held accountable for their results. Policy decisions were to be made by analysts in relative isolation from educational groups (Gordon, 1992). As departmental heads emphasised efficiency and economy based on performance measurement, critics have noted that interdepartmental coordination and the quality of policy advice have been compromised (Mascarenhas, 1993).

Before the reforms, Ministry of Education policy makers were experts in their fields and employed a high degree of autonomy over decision making. Following the state sector reforms, all recommendations were questioned by their managers with regard to how much work had to be done, what the options were, how much they would cost and how projects fitted in with government policy. It was into this environment that the National Languages Policy Project was introduced.

There have been reports that there were three versions of the Waite Report, *Aotearo* (Peddie, 1993:29). In the interview with this writer, Waite confirmed that there were "stages" in the document preparation and that the first version did contain recommendations. However, "they were very much in draft form and never had detailed costing implications attached" (J. Waite, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

The writer also interviewed a former Minister of Education Policy Manager who had been responsible for managing the Languages Policy Project. It was she who required that the recommendations be removed because the level of financial support required to implement the recommendations was "an absolute ideal" and the recommendations "weren't in the syntax that ministers would ever agree to" (Director of Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 31 August, 1995). The draft languages policy report did not deal realistically with costings and it was recognised that the report would not be endorsed by the Minister of Education in that form. The Policy Manager asked that the recommendations be taken out and that the document be published as a discussion paper which would highlight the important issues. For both Waite and the Policy Manager, it was important to "get the work out, to get people discussing it... we both had a kind of ideal dream that once we actually got it all done, it might develop its own momentum" (Director of Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

The report was published in two parts to maximise readership in the belief that there would be more people who would read at least Part A than those who would read a report published as one larger document. However, the publication of *Aotearo* did not result in parties within government picking up the issues in the way that had been hoped (Director of Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 31 August, 1995).

Funding considerations were an important factor in the government's decision to replace *Aotearo* with a small number of discrete and more limited policy developments. However, a political dimension to the decision not to proceed with the National Languages Policy Project should not be discounted. In Australia, the Languages Policy movement had bi-partisan support. In New Zealand, the project was initiated by a Labour Government. Although the incoming National Government agreed to continue to fund the writing of the report, the initiative did not originate with the minister who was in a position to develop and implement a policy.

Aotearo and beyond

The Ministry of Education acknowledges that *Aotearo* has been influential in selected areas of policy development. It has been regarded by the Ministry of Education as a "key resource" and as "an important reference point" for the development of curriculum statements, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and the selection of languages for new development work (Acting Group Manager Policy, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 10 November, 1995). One former Senior Manager of the Policy Division of the Ministry of Education stated that *Aotearo* had had "a profound influence on the development of languages policy issues" (Senior Manager, Policy Division, Ministry of Education, personal communication, 7 December, 1995).

The Ministry of Education Briefing Paper (*New Zealand Languages Policy: An update*, 1995) states that by June 1994, "considerable policy work had been done in two areas, notably Maori and second language learning". A consultative document, *Toitu to reo, A consultation document about the Māori language*, developed by the Ministry of Maori Affairs and the Maori Language Commission, maps a strategy for the revitalisation of the Maori language into the next millennium, and currently sits with government awaiting wider discussion. However, Professor Timoti Karetu, the Maori Language Commissioner, has stated that the development of the strategy document came about through 'te hikoi mo te reo Māori', direct action by Maori rather than through any response to the National Languages Policy Project (Karetu, 1996).

Second language learning initiatives have been prominent in recent language policy developments despite their low priority ranking in the Waite Report. Considerable progress has been made on the development of policy advice on options for advancing language learning in the school curriculum, final curriculum statements for te reo

Māori, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese and Samoan have been published within the last year and a curriculum statement for Korean is undergoing development during 1997. \$ 4.8 million has been allocated between 1995 and 1997 to the development of international languages of trade and tourism through the Second Language Learning Project. However, questions have been raised concerning the initiative, particularly with respect to the availability of suitably qualified teachers to deliver these programmes (Shackleford, 1996).

The promotion of international languages has gained prominence in government thinking because it is associated with the government's political and economic agenda. There has been considerable rhetoric about the need for an enterprise culture and the desire to increase productivity through international trade and business, especially in the Asian region (McKinnon, 1992). However, it has been argued that there is a gap between the rhetoric of government and its promotion of the learning of international languages and the reality of actual achievement. When compared to Australia, New Zealand still lacks a systematic approach to the development and funding of international languages (Shackleford and Peddie, 1996).

The other priorities of adult literacy, first language maintenance and language support for school aged students whose first language is not English have received some resources, but have had only minimal policy work completed. The other policy initiative signaled by the Ministry of Education in 1993, the establishment of the Asia 2000 Foundation, has been an important development but one that occurred outside the Ministry of Education, within the Ministry of External Relations and Trade.

Is a languages policy really desirable?

The question needs to be asked as to whether a languages policy is in fact desirable and achievable given that many of the conditions under which the previous attempt to develop a comprehensive policy still prevail. There is still lack of data, still a low level of awareness about languages issues in government, and still the difficulties associated with interdepartmental cooperation.

New Zealand is not alone in having no explicit languages policy. Kaplan sees languages planning in practice as "a constant uncoordinated activity in every society" (1993:5). In his advocacy for the development of national languages policies he sees the need to bring "a modicum of order" into this "existing chaos... to permit the more effective and efficient utilisation of existing resources and to permit intelligent human resource development to occur" (Kaplan, 1993:9).

Significant amounts of money are being allocated to languages development in New Zealand but we still have the need for "a modicum of order" and the need for more intelligent human resource development to occur. Languages issues are too important to

be left as an unplanned activity, for while New Zealand still lacks an explicit statement of languages policy, there are important implicit languages policies operating.

In New Zealand, major languages-related issues remain outstanding and are not being addressed through a comprehensive languages policy. In the school and tertiary sectors, the 1991 Immigration Act has resulted in a high demand for English language programmes. There is no mechanism for on-arrival language instruction and orientation for new immigrants, and institutions have been required to respond to the demand for English language classes at local level. In 1997 the Ministry of Labour and the New Zealand Employment Service aim to reduce the number of professionally qualified people who are registered as long term unemployed by funding English language courses throughout the country. The initiative has been welcomed by language professionals, but can be seen as a reaction to a problem rather than as a planned response to a predictable consequence of a change in immigration laws.

Similarly, the adoption of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for principal applicants seeking immigration, and the punitive measures for those dependents unable to meet the minimum required standard, are symptomatic of reactive responses to language issues rather than a planned approach which places value on diversity and multilingualism.

Refugees continue to arrive into New Zealand under a quota system. Much is made in international forums about New Zealand's generous quota of refugees. On arrival, however, refugees are entitled to only six weeks of orientation and language instruction after which they have few options for further study because of the ever increasing cost of tuition available in tertiary institutions.

The announcement of the National Languages Policy Project in 1990 (Goff, 1990) emphasised the important principle that the diversity of languages and culture in New Zealand was a national strength and one that should be fostered through a coordinated and planned approach. The definition of language diversity as a strength and as a first principal in language development has been at the heart of Australian language policy development. Tollefson states that Lo Bianco's report (1987) in Australia "located multilingualism and multiculturalism at the core of Australian history and identity and emphasised language pluralism as a national resource rather than as a problem to be overcome" (Tollefson, 1991:178). Without the benefit of a national languages policy in New Zealand, government response to languages issues have too often been framed as a response to a politically damaging problem rather than as a planned development of our multilingual resources. Languages professionals have a role to play in making government and society more aware of the positive aspects of immigration, multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Diversity and language pluralism should be claimed as a national resource in any future attempt to develop a more coherent and rational approach to language planning.

The future

A languages policy would be a guideline for action; it would create a framework that would allow discretion yet provide direction. A languages policy would need to go beyond symbolic policy. It should be a substantive policy with a strategy for implementation and details of resourcing implications as seen in the Australian models.

If there is to be any real progress on languages policy, languages professionals will have to be active in its creation. Although it has as yet only produced a statement of principle, the work of the Language Policy 2000 Steering Committee in Wellington has attempted to keep languages in the political arena. In May 1996, a new document, *A languages policy for New Zealand*, was developed and distributed to fifteen political candidates. A "slightly revamped" languages policy document was launched at the Beehive just prior to the October 1996 election. (Languages Policy 2000 Steering Committee Newsletter, January 1997). Some politicians at a New Zealand Association of Languages Teachers Conference just prior to the October 1996 election, stated their support for a languages policy. However, other priorities on the current political agenda now seem likely to overshadow serious discussion of a comprehensive languages policy, although there are certainly signs that te reo Māori will receive more attention in the new political environment.

The detail that is required for a languages policy document must be based on thoroughly researched data about the languages situation in New Zealand and this is work that languages professionals can undertake. There is much that can be done by small scale research into languages situations in New Zealand, properly collated and published. Much of the data in *Aotearoa* is becoming out of date, but much is in the public domain and could be used to inform the debate about the implementation of a languages policy.

A languages research institute to undertake research into language planning (Peddie, 1993; Crombie and Paltridge, 1993) is a goal that should be revived. Kaplan recommended that a national languages institute be established at the earliest possible time and this "may become the driving mechanism for the ongoing implementation and adjustment of the National Languages Policy" (Kaplan, 1992:1). The Language Policy 2000 Steering Committee have stated a need "to lobby for the establishment of a languages research centre, based at Victoria (University of Wellington) but with networks elsewhere" (Languages Policy 2000 Steering Committee Newsletter, January 1997), although how this might be achieved and funded is by no means clear.

Any new attempt at creating a languages policy document policy needs to have explicit support from languages professionals in all sectors of education from schools, polytechnics, universities, community groups and beyond. Professionals from all sectors could formulate a coherent set of beliefs and strategies and seek support and advocacy from outside the education sector. Policy making is a political process.

Success can be achieved by finding the right people in government who can advocate for an issue. Arguments in favour of a languages policy have to be presented as costs and benefits to government and in a form and a language to which government can relate.

In conclusion, The National Languages Policy Project has disappeared but the need for a more coherent approach to languages policy still remains.

Note

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