

A LATIN REVIVAL – I WISH!

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'Feds fund revival of Latin', '\$1.8 million for authorities to develop classical Latin and Greek curriculums' – If only one could believe what one reads in the *Courier Mail*! As a classicist, I'd be delighted by this news. Sadly, as always, the truth proves to be much less salacious than the headlines. Despite the impression given by the *Courier Mail* that Christopher Pyne has discovered his inner gladiator and is currently trying force the children of Australia to speak in long-dead tongues, all that has happened is that five additional languages - of which Latin and classical Greek are two - have joined the pre-existing eight modern languages on the national curriculum. Latin is not being made compulsory. Spanish, Mandarin, Chinese, and French will still be able to be taught. The only difference is that now schools can choose to add Latin and Greek to their suite of offerings.

And that's a good thing. Even on a purely utilitarian basis, learning Latin is extraordinarily beneficial to students. Studies continue to show that learning Latin provides an excellent grounding for the acquisition of other foreign languages by English speakers. This is the case not only with those languages for which Latin is the basis (Italian, French, Spanish), but ALL languages. Part of the reason for this is that, as with all highly inflected languages where form follows function, Latin requires its students to constantly stop and think about what each word in is doing in a sentence. It is for this reason that Latin not only helps with foreign languages, but also English expression. There have been wonderful initiatives in the UK where children as young as four have been exposed to Latin as a way of improving their general literacy. Indeed, for young and old, Latin is a great tool for improving one's English vocabulary. One of the distinctive features of the English language is that it has a much larger vocabulary than any other language on the planet. Knowledge of Greek and Latin roots helps people understand and remember the meanings of many words – particularly technical or scientific words. This is why learning Latin and Greek has become routine as part of pre-Med or pre-Law courses in the US. For students with a Latin background, all those technical anatomical terms are a breeze.

Yet, such utilitarian arguments are the least important reasons why we should celebrate and encourage the learning of Latin. Just as one of the reasons why we learn Mandarin is that we want to appreciate a vibrant and ancient culture (or is it really just about selling people coal?), so too the study of Latin allows us into the heads of arguably one of the most influential cultures the West has seen. The legacy of Rome can be seen all around us. And you can only truly, deeply appreciate the Romans if you can understand the world in their terms. Latin is a beautiful, clever language. Few quips are as stinging as Latin barbs. Few languages can rival Latin for combining economy of expression with profundity of thought. I defy anyone to be unmoved by Latin epic or elegy. Latin is bawdy and funny. It is often deeply subversive. I fear for the teachers at Brisbane Girls Grammar School, where Latin is being made compulsory, if their girls get hold of Book III of Ovid's *Ars amatoria* which outlines in explicit and graphic detail about how girls can trap and seduce a lover.

Ever since the Renaissance, critics have been attacking the study of Latin. The language has been labeled everything from 'immoral' to 'irrelevant'. The one word that has never been successfully applied is 'forgotten'. The faux Latin of the *Courier Mail's* headline 'Absurdus Maximus' only works because everybody instinctively knows what Latin looks and sounds like. It's part of our intellectual DNA, and for this reason, if no other, it is worth studying.

(Professor Blanshard was appointed inaugural Paul Eliadis Professor of Classics and Ancient History at The University of Queensland, in 2013. A generous donation from Brisbane clinical haematologist, oncologist and patron of the arts Dr Paul Eliadis established this academic Chair in Classics and Ancient History. Dr Eliadis, who is a University of Queensland graduate, said he made the donation because he was convinced that understanding and appreciating art, ancient history and the classics formed key elements of a well-rounded education. "To me, any Western university that doesn't have a department that teaches the classics does not have a birth certificate," Dr Eliadis said. "It is not just one faculty that makes a university. They are all important, but to forget about where you came from is bizarre." UQ is the only University in Queensland to offer courses in the history, culture, language and literature of Ancient Greece and Rome.)