

Silliness or spite?

The latest antics of Jean-Claude Juncker, the Commission President, will do nothing at all to improve the atmosphere for the forthcoming Brexit negotiations. In a speech in Florence, he claimed that “slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe.” He then switched into French and drew applause from his audience of EU officials, local leaders and Italian students.

This follows on from claims made a few days after the Brexit vote last June by Danuta Hübner, a Polish MEP who was formerly a Commissioner, that English will lose its status as an official EU language after Brexit.

“We have a regulation...where every EU country has the right to notify one official language,” she said. “The Irish have notified Gaelic, and the Maltese have notified Maltese, so you have only the U.K. notifying English. If we don’t have the U.K., we don’t have English.”

Is this pure silliness or spite? Given she is Polish, Hübner’s claims are particularly daft. The UK joined the EU in 1973 and although English then became an official EU language, French continued to be the principal language within the institutions. Not until 2004 when Poland, along with nine other countries, joined did English then take its place alongside French in official communications. In other words, it was not because of us but because many of the staff and MEPs from the new accession countries who spoke very poor French but spoke English pretty well. There is therefore a strong irony in especially an Eastern European seeming so keen to rob English of its official status given that its higher profile in the EU came about for the benefit of her countrymen and women.

As a former employee of the European Parliament myself, I can

vouch for the excellence of language tuition in the EU's institutions and no doubt the many Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and others will end up speaking good French after two or three years at these classes, but however spiteful, the EU may feel towards us, any attempt to squeeze our language out of the corridors of Brussels is as futile as King Knut's alleged attempts to stop the tide coming in. English is the language of IT, the language of world trade and the second most widely spoken language in the world after Mandarin Chinese. No amount of hostility towards our language on account of its associations with Brexit, is going to change this one iota.

As for Mr Juncker, he has been playing the old game popular with British Europhiles of confusing the EU and Europe. I doubt if he will ever manage banish English from the EU's institutions, but even if I am wrong here, that is as far as I will go. English will not lose its importance in the classrooms and the TV channels of the real world beyond the European Quarter in Brussels. After all, most people do not want a job in this strange parallel universe and whatever the citizens of EU-27 may think of our decision to leave, they are far too pragmatic. They will not be as stupid as to cut off their nose to spite their face – or should I say, *pace* Mr Juncker, “couper le nez en depit de leur visage?”