Promoting the Teaching of Classics in Schools

by Lord Aberdare

On 6 November 2012 I initiated a short (1-hour) debate in the House of Lords to ask Her Majesty’s Government what steps they will take to promote the teaching of classics in schools. Apart from myself and the responding Minister – Lord (Jonathan) Hill of Oareford, recently (on 7 January) promoted to the Cabinet-level post of Leader of the House of Lords – eight other Peers spoke in the debate, covering the topic from a range of perspectives with knowledge, enthusiasm, commitment and even some Welsh bravado from Lord (Martin) Thomas of Gresford.

I have benefited enormously from my own classical studies, extending from an early age right up to my recentes, although I am embarrassed to admit that I can now claim only to be a lifelong classicist. Those studies have helped me in learning foreign languages (French, Italian, a bit of Welsh), they have been even more valuable in strengthening my grasp of English grammar and vocabulary; and of course they have immeasurably enhanced my appreciation and enjoyment of classically-based literature, art and music. My greatest musical passion is for the French composer Hector Berlioz, one of whose own literary gods, along with Shakespeare, was Virgil: he even described his own greatest masterpiece, the opera Tessier, as ‘Virgil Shakespeareised’.

Beyond that, I find that the knowledge gained through studying classics informs and illumines my life in a multitude of ways. Wales, where I have a home, is full of reminders of the Roman presence some 2000 years ago: roads, fortifications, villas, marching camps, amphitheatres, towns, even gold mines. My early career as a computer programmer and debugger with IBM was greatly facilitated by the logical approach picked up through parsing Latin (especially) and Greek. My skills, such as they are, in reasoning, writing, analysing, debating – and doing crosswords and Sudokus – all reflect my classical education.

So my reason for sponsoring the Lords debate was the desire to give more students, particularly in state schools, the opportunity to enjoy similar benefits. During 2011 I read an article in The Spectator by Peter Jones, that former Inner Juncture of the Classics and kindling light of bodies such as Friends of the Classics and Classics for All, in which he outlined survey results strikingly confirming the benefits seen by people who had studied classics. Later I attended an inspiring Classics for All event hosted at the Mansion House by the then Lord Mayor of London, David Wootton, himself a classicist – as of course is that other French composer, although one who was himself a passionate Classicist. His principal interests include education and employment, the arts (especially classical music), Welsh affairs and corporate responsibility issues.
**Lord Aberdare (Proposer):**

I will seek to make three points: that classics is important, that it should be offered in more, preferably most schools, and that the Government should actively support that aim, including, if necessary, providing for appropriate qualifications and examinations systems and ensuring an adequate supply of teachers. First, to adopt the old Guinness ad, ‘Classics is good for you.’ Surely there can be no other subject area offering such a breadth of learning opportunity and interest encompassing language, literature, history, philosophy, art, technology, culture and others. Latin and Greek are not only beautiful in learning languages in general, but they are invaluable aids to improving grammar and vocabulary in our own language. English. Some 60% of English words are estimated to have Greek or Latin roots. In the vocabulary of the sciences, that figure rises to over 90%. As highly inflected languages, with all those conjugations, declensions, cases, tenses, modes, voices and so on—never forgetting the ablative absolute—Latin and Greek are invaluable routes to learning intellectual discipline and logic…

Secondly, classics is good for schools. Currently, about 70% of independent schools teach classics, but only about 25% of state schools in many cases mainly to their more talented students. State schools often face problems of timetabling and supporting the small groups of very talented students. State schools in many cases mainly to their more independent schools teach classics, which is important, that it should be offered in more, preferably most schools, and that the Government should actively support that aim, including, if necessary, providing for appropriate qualifications and examinations systems and ensuring an adequate supply of teachers. First, to adopt the old Guinness ad, ‘Classics is good for you.’ Surely there can be no other subject area offering such a breadth of learning opportunity and interest encompassing language, literature, history, philosophy, art, technology, culture and others. Latin and Greek are not only beautiful in learning languages in general, but they are invaluable aids to improving grammar and vocabulary in our own language. English. Some 60% of English words are estimated to have Greek or Latin roots. In the vocabulary of the sciences, that figure rises to over 90%. As highly inflected languages, with all those conjugations, declensions, cases, tenses, modes, voices and so on—never forgetting the ablative absolute—Latin and Greek are invaluable routes to learning intellectual discipline and logic…

**Lord Hill (respondent):**

There are good practical reasons for children to study the classics, but we should not rest solely on the utilitarian argument that classics are good because they will help young people to get on in the world. We also have to have more freedom to decide what they teach. We have pursued that goal in two main ways. First, we are seeing less of the national curriculum for all schools, making it less prescriptive and leaving more time for schools to make their own judgments about what and how to teach and, in the context of today’s debate, freeing them up to teach classics.

Secondly, and of growing significance, academics do not have to follow the national curriculum. They have the freedom to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils. More than half of all secondary schools are now offering some form of Classics or Classics-related courses, and most have a Classics teacher. We should want our children to have a window into a different world, to be thrilled or moved by the Greek myths, to be astonished by the achievements of the Greeks and Romans and to see how much we still owe to them today. Nor do I subscribe to the notion the noble Baroness, Lady Cousins, made this point forcefully that classics are somehow elitist and that they cannot have any relevance to children from poor backgrounds. It is patronising in the extreme to suggest that children on free school meals or who live in inner cities are not able to study Latin or that it is not relevant to their lives.

We have heard this afternoon about a number of initiatives, many of which were prompted by the excellent organisation Classics for All, which is certainly raising an interest in the classics in state schools. Rightly the question put was what are the Government doing to help to support that revival? Alternatively, as the noble Lord, Lord Aberdare, asked, is there any way that there are any constraints that the Government can help to overcome.

The first point that I should make is that in our overall approach is a positive one. We want schools to have more freedom to decide what they teach. We have pursued that goal in two main ways. First, we are seeing less of the national curriculum for all schools, making it less prescriptive and leaving more time for schools to make their own judgments about what and how to teach and, in the context of today’s debate, freeing them up to teach classics.

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The effect of the introduction of the EBacc on schools seems to be shining. Whereas in 2010, 22% of pupils in maintained schools of all kinds and 31% of independent schools studying to become teachers of Latin and Greek, which are priority subjects, dropped to 10% by 2014, which is quite a marked up.

I was asked specifically about having more than one exam board for Latin—the noble Lord, Lord Aberdare, asked me about the Government’s intention to move to one exam board per subject. As he knows, we think that it is necessary to protect the rigour of qualifications and to stop a race to the bottom. The EBacc lies behind our thinking in moving to one exam board. We certainly do not want the new EBaccs to prevent greater breadth of study and a balanced curriculum that includes time to study Classics.

By giving schools more freedom around the curriculum and employment, by raising the profile of Classics and by re-emphasising the importance of academic subjects through the EBacc, by tackling the culture of low aspiration for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, we can raise standards. The EBacc is raising standards for all pupils. I will certainly draw some of the points made this afternoon to the attention of my noble friend Lord Hill, who is in charge of these matters, and flag them up with the Minister for schools. Lord Hill, Lord Aberdare, have also introduced the EBacc measure, which shines a spotlight on those schools offering the mix of subjects, including Latin and Greek, that are most likely to attract pupils who are able to go on to the top universities. The effect of the
It was good to see the discussion move beyond the usual rhetoric of Latin being good for students, and engage with some issues over the point of education in general, and the relationship between a utilitarian and ‘for its own sake’ view of education.

Baroness Coussian helpfully pointed out that Latin should not be reserved for an undefined elite. The discussion was, however, couched in the language of state versus independent schools as an elitism issue, and perhaps it is time to look more carefully at what constitutes a good school, or differentiates between schools. Lord Stevenson claimed that Latin offered rigour, resilience and creativity; words such as ‘rigour’ are often applied to Latin, and it would be helpful to have a discussion over precisely what this meant, and whether it is indeed unique to Latin.

Concerns were expressed over British education in general; to assume Latin is the most appropriate solution seems a heavy burden to place on Latin and further discussion is needed, including proper research into the effect of initiatives, which are largely un-assessed.

As the noble speakers expressed, there are many projects to support Latin, many people who would study it if they could, and great good will towards it. How do we harness and measure this positivety? Important issues such as the place of the WJEC certificate, the role of the EBacc or new EBC and teacher-training were all raised, and now we must work on addressing as well as identifying solutions to these problems. This debate acts as a rallying cry to the subject community to keep its profile high but also look at itself and assess its work carefully.

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Correspondence on the Lords' Debate is welcomed for possible publication in the next issue of JCT.