

Islander in a land of moaners

Tony O'Brien - director of the British Council Poland, a descendant of the first Irish king Brian Boru a world citizen, a man with a mission. On the 70th anniversary of the Polish British Council office he talks with Joanna Knap about the school of the future, Polish people's potential and his spine-chilling travels.

,A Cambridge University graduate in law, instead of making a great career in his country goes abroad to teach English. Why such an idea?

I've always been drawn to travelling. I thought that before I started working in my profession, I would go on a trip of a lifetime. But I hate travelling as a tourist. I like to "blend" into a crowd, feel the country I am in. I got in touch with an international organisation called VSO, whose mission is fighting against poverty in third world countries through education and other means. They sent me to Aswan in Egypt. As you can imagine, my law degree was of no use there. To be useful, I enrolled for an English teacher training course. I started teaching and this job absorbed me totally. I spent two years in Aswan, and then I travelled somewhere else. People often ask me if I have regrets. Not a single moment! Surely, if I had worked as a lawyer, I would have earned more; perhaps I'd have enjoyed greater prestige. There are, however, values that you can't buy: I wouldn't have got to know the world so well, I wouldn't have met my wife Yolanda who, like me, was first a voluntary worker. I wouldn't have met so many interesting people and wouldn't have had so many fascinating experiences.

Morocco, Singapore, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka – it's hard to list all the countries you have been to. Where did you really get the adrenaline going?

When we were working in Iraq in 1977 my wife and I went on a journey to Afghanistan. We were driving through a desert: no borders, no roads, kilometres of sand. You are driving dead scared, you can count only on yourself and you're praying that the route you've chosen won't lead you straight to some hole where you'll get stuck forever. From time to time you see some hazy shapes, but you don't know if it's something real or a mirage. It was really extreme; I can't compare it to anything else!

For 30 years, you've been working for the British Council, a cultural and educational organisation representing Great Britain in 110 countries. You are like a happy old couple. Doesn't it get boring?

There's no chance it will ever get boring. Apart from promoting British creative ideas and achievements, and apart from teaching English, we are running many interesting projects – cultural, social. And as a British Council boss I must be both a good organiser and a good businessman. For example, it was crucial in Singapore and Hong-Kong - our biggest English teaching centres in the world: each with 8-10 thousand students. Organising language courses for so many people of various ages and professions is not an easy task. The government of Singapore decided that by 2015 their country will have had such a high quality of services that it could be called an Asian Switzerland. We had to teach lower grade workers of Singapore airlines, for instance porters, the majority of whom didn't speak English. But how to teach effectively uneducated people who did not

do well in the traditional education system? So we prepared new teaching methods, suitable to the students' levels. It worked really well.

That's why I was really surprised when I read on the Internet that you teach using traditional methods.

It only means that we're against extreme methodologies, against offering courses such as: 'English in two weeks', or the 'Silent Way'. Teaching with the use of the Internet, multimedia, materials with "alive" contemporary English and professional, experienced teachers – that's how we've built our good reputation on the market.

For years we've also been organising English language exams that are acknowledged in the whole world. Only last year over 30 thousand people received exam certificates. Our youngest customer was 5 years old while the eldest was 80.

The British Council is working in partnership with our Ministry of Education and educational organisations, promoting the so-called vision of the school of the future. What can we learn from you?

Schools everywhere must face serious problems, for instance: violence, drug addiction, ineffective teaching methods. We think that if one wants to overcome these problems, one needs not only action taken on the highest level of the education sector, but also initiatives from teachers and students, who strongly believe that they also can do something. In our project called Challenges in Schools (which involves 12 countries in central and eastern Europe) we are trying to motivate people to create together a model of a safe school, which uses modern technologies, where foreign languages are taught effectively, and which also develops negotiation and co-operation skills. A school that plays an integrating role in the local community.

Since Poland became a member of the European Union, the British Council has been accomplishing its mission more often through international cultural and social programmes.

European countries face similar challenges, connected with open borders, growing economic and political dependence, intermingling of cultures. Therefore we think that having a common strategy and exchange of ideas will be useful. For example, the British Council organises the International Young Creative Entrepreneur (IYCE) awards, a competition open for young creative and business people active in the arts, film or media sectors. The winners of the Polish stages of the competition travel to the UK for over 10 days, have meetings with British representatives of their respective sectors, participate in seminars, trade fairs, festivals. The winners of the international finals are awarded a money prize, but for young entrepreneurs the competition final is most of all an opportunity to exchange experiences and make new business contacts.

Are there many people interested in such initiatives?

A lot. Poland has lots of talented, creative people who like new challenges. You can see it for example in the educational sport programme Dreams and Teams, which we are running in co-operation with the Ministry of Sport. Young Polish people learn how to organise sport festivals, and how to encourage local communities to join in. Apart from Poland, there are six other countries in our region participating in the programme, and

Polish people are ahead in undertaking new initiatives. I must admit that after arriving in your country, both my wife and me were pleasantly surprised. We thought that we would see a grey country with grey people. Polish people have great potential within themselves - if only they stopped moaning so much. If somebody organised a world moaning championship, Poland for sure would be the winner.

You must bear two more years with us moaners, and then you're going to some other part of the world. How do you bear being always away from your mother country?

Paradoxically, sometimes it's easier to find yourself in a foreign place than live in your own country. When I start working in a new place, I gain two new "families": one is the British Council staff, another one – the local church community. In your home country, when you move from town to town, you must take care of everything, because who cares about you there? And, coming back to the Poland subject, I found myself here really quickly. Immediately after coming here, my wife and I bought bus tickets and travelled around Warsaw, since it is the best way to assimilate into the local community. I like your country; I have a lot of friends here. You have great cosmopolitan towns, rich culture and traditions, parks bathed in green. I still have a lot to see here. I say to my colleagues: "if I ever tell you that I know this country, pack me up and send me to England straight away".

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