

AIKB Radio Project: Yann Rivallain

Yann Rivallain – About Him

Yann	<p>I was born in Brittany, in Lorient, but I was brought up near Nantes, which is interesting because the Departement called Loire Atlantique has been taken away from the administrative region of Brittany. Then I went on to study around Europe a little bit, first in Nantes and then I spent a year in England, at Staffordshire University, where I did a post-grad in international marketing. Then I also spent a year in Germany, in Heidelberg, which was very interesting and, after that, I went to Paris to study, for three years, European studies and Political studies, and the final year was, sort of, an open class set up between different universities, and that year I spent a third of the year in Bath, a third in Berlin and the last third in Paris. After that I went to live in Ireland for a little bit.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Would that have been when you were working for the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages?</p>
Yann	<p>That's right. When I finished studying in Paris, as a Breton, I would actually probably find a job with those studies down there, but I didn't want to feel trapped and forced to live in Paris for twenty or thirty years, so I looked for a job elsewhere in Europe and I had been to Ireland quite a few times and I saw a job offer to be a translator and after a year and a half I moved on to the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. As part of my studies I had actually researched European policy towards minority languages, so I knew about that organisation and I had actually applied for a job with them before and that time it worked and I spent about four years at the Bureau.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Speaking then of lesser used languages, the Breton language itself has, for many years, been in decline I understand, and was placed on UNESCO's list of endangered languages. What's the current situation?</p>

Yann	<p>Well it's still very much endangered. The UNESCO made that report in the '90s. Given the fact that the Breton native speakers had stopped transmitting the language, and the chances for it to survive were very thin, that report at the time was a little bit challenged, because actually the schools had been doing well and, in the late '90s there was a lot of hope, at the turn of the century as well, but sadly, in the last 10 years, the last 5 years especially, the schools have had difficulties developing more because they need money, they need more political support and we've realised that, without that political support and that money, they won't grow, definitely not as fast as they have done. And in that situation the language then will remain very much endangered. We've seen in other parts of Europe, 30 years ago, languages like Welsh, which is related to Breton, was pretty much in the same situation as Breton. The difference now is enormous. Welsh is redeveloping, most children have access to Welsh. Take the example for the Basque language as well. The same situation. Basque was nearly, nearly sort of erased from the country at the end of the Franco years. Now Basque, with a lot of political support, with a lot of money invested, has really redeveloped and it's virtually a bi-lingual society again, which is the aim of most Breton people. None of them actually dream of having a Brittany one day where we only speak Breton, but we really have a bi-lingual dream, and, or tri-lingual even if possible and that is possible because some countries have done it in the space of thirty years.</p>
Interviewer	<p>You say 'the aim of most Breton people'. Is that an exaggeration?</p>

Yann	<p>Well, I'm talking about the ones who are, sort of, attached to the language. I'm not talking about, there are a lot of Breton people, actually it would be wrong to say that a lot of Breton people don't care about the language because the polls show that, I think it's 85 or 89 per cent of Breton people think that the language is an important thing to defend and to keep. That doesn't mean that it will do anything for it, for that, ...learning it, but they feel that way. You're right, a lot of people don't think Breton language every day when they get up in the morning, but for the ones who are attached to it, unlike other countries, like Ireland, where I've lived, where the Irish speakers, the ones who really struggle to keep Irish alive actually have the intention of living through Irish, sort of, you know, have an Irish world where you speak Irish every day, where you have your Irish media, and you don't need to go through English at all. It's a subtlety and I think an important one in Brittany. I think a lot of Breton speakers actually, you know, are kind of used to switching languages. I don't know if it's a geographical stage, you know, or what, but people actually, I don't think... it's a bit different here. People are kind of keen to explain in other languages what their language is, to meet with other people, change languages, so that's why. It's a bit sad because the reasons for the French state not to support languages, really when we go to the bottom of the problem, is that they're scared that this will encourage, you know, separatism or the idea that some countries, like the Basque country or Corsica or Brittany would set free just because they want to keep the language. Some language speakers might want that but it's not because you want to defend the language that you want that, and some other parts of Europe have shown that, have demonstrated that. So I think it's a shame that in France we are a little bit behind with those things.</p>
Interviewer	And you put that down to central government pressure?

Yann	<p>Definitely, definitely, for the problem of not supporting the language in the last twenty years. The decline of the Breton language is not only, hasn't been caused only by the French policies though. The Breton people, at the middle of the century actually, wanted to learn French and become French even, to get jobs, to move on in life, to maybe break away with a civilisation that, for some of them, had been tough. So, but that's sort of nearly passed already now. A lot of people now aspire to something else. They want to keep part of their heritage, they don't want to become mono-lingual again and that now, as the years go by, actually the responsibility of the French state is getting harder and stronger and stronger because the fears that they had, the reasons they had to do that in the 19th century or the 20th century have gone. Most European states have signed conventions and have recognised the importance of their heritage so it's, er, in that respect the French government is more and more backwards as the years go by.</p>
Interviewer	<p>OK, and on a different note, how do you see the influx of new residents from abroad, particularly from the United Kingdom, how do you see that affecting Brittany? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?</p>
Yann	<p>For me, generally, it's been a very good thing. First thing, I've seen that a lot of people have come to areas where Breton people couldn't live any more, didn't want to live anymore. A lot of them have moved to cities and especially outside the centre of Brittany, Kreiz Breizh, so that has been very good to repopulate some of those areas, that's very important. Of course, that has helped to renovate a lot of the houses. A lot of Breton traditional houses had been actually left empty and had lost, completely lost value in the eyes of Breton people, that's only 30 years ago. Through all these people, a lot of them have been renovated, so part of the heritage has been preserved. And, generally speaking, I think, I see that as an, a sort of an opening. Brittany's geographically a little bit isolated. We, em, a lot of people, statistics show that a lot of people here, a bit more than other parts</p>

	<p>of France, speak English, travel quite a lot so having a bit of diversity on your doorstep is a good thing if it makes life feel better. So the European feelings of Brittany, it's quite strong, the European feelings are quite strong here in Brittany so a lot of people, like me at least, appreciate having a bit of Europe around and mixing culture and languages so I think the effect is positive.</p>
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