Proving Foreign Law in U.S. Federal Court: Is The Use Of Foreign Legal Experts "Bad Practice"?

A panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit last week decided a fairly routine contract case—applying French law (opinion here). In doing so, Judges Easterbrook, Posner and Wood stated their views on the best means to prove foreign law. Of course, they each noted (in separate opinions) that the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure give courts a wide berth to rely on any source or authority, including sworn statements by experts in foreign law. But Judges Easterbrook and Posner see the use of such experts as "bad practice"—in their view, it's better for judges to consult English-language translations and treatises, which will be relatively objective, rather than the statements of experts hired by each party. According to Judge Easterbrook:

> *Trying to establish foreign law through experts' declarations not only is expensive (experts must be located and paid) but also adds an adversary's spin, which the court then must discount. Published sources such as treatises do not have the slant that characterizes the warring declarations presented in this case. Because objective, English-language descriptions of French law are readily available, we prefer them to the parties' declarations.*

Indeed, Judge Easterbrook gave more credence to a Danish Court's resolution of a parallel case than the parties' experts. In his view, "Denmark is a civil-law nation, and a Danish court's understanding and application of the civil-law tradition is more likely to be accurate than are the warring declarations of the paid experts in this litigation."

Judge Posner was even more scathing of foreign legal experts. He wrote separately "merely to express emphatic support for, and modestly to amplify, the court's criticism of a common and authorized but unsound judicial practice. That is the practice of trying to establish the meaning of a law of a foreign country by testimony or affidavits of expert witnesses":

Lawyers who testify to the meaning of foreign law, whether they are practitioners or professors, are paid for their testimony and selected on the basis of the convergence of their views with the litigating position of the client, or their willingness to fall in with the views urged upon them by the client. These are the banes of expert testimony. When the testimony concerns a scientific or other technical issue, it may be unreasonable to expect a judge to resolve the issue without the aid of such testimony. But judges are experts on law, and there is an abundance of published materials, in the form of treatises, law review articles, statutes, and cases, . . . to provide neutral illumination of issues of foreign law. I cannot fathom why in dealing with the meaning of laws of English-speaking countries that share our legal origins judges should prefer paid affidavits and testimony to published materials. It is only a little less perverse for judges to rely on testimony to ascertain the law of a country whose official language is not English, at least if is a major country and has a modern legal system [(because law and secondary sources are readily translated into English)]. . . . [O]ur linguistic provincialism does not excuse intellectual provincialism. It does not justify our judges in relying on paid witnesses to spoon feed them foreign law . . . . I do not criticize the district judge in this case, because he was following the common practice. But it is a bad practice, followed like so many legal practices out of habit rather than reflection. . . .

Judge Wood disagreed, arguing that judges are too likely err in interpreting foreign law, especially when it is in a foreign language:

Exercises in comparative law are notoriously difficult, because the U.S. reader is likely to miss nuances in the foreign law, to fail to appreciate the way in which one branch of the other country's law interacts with another, or to assume erroneously that the foreign law mirrors U.S. law when it does not. . . .

There will be many times when testimony from an acknowledged expert in foreign law will be helpful, or even necessary, to ensure that the . . . U.S. judge understands the full context of the foreign provision. Some published articles or treatises, written particularly for a U.S. audience, might perform the same service, but many will not, even if they are written in English, and especially if they are translated into English from another language. It will often be most efficient and useful for the judge to have

> *before her an expert who can provide the needed precision on the spot, rather than have the judge wade through a number of secondary sources. In practice, the experts produced by the parties are often the authors of the leading treatises and scholarly articles in the foreign country anyway. In those cases, it is hard to see why the person's views cannot be tested in court, to guard against the possibility that he or she is just a mouthpiece for one party.*

Both Judges Easterbrook and Posner recognized a caveat. According to the latter, the use of foreign law experts was "excusable only when the foreign law is the law of a country with such an obscure or poorly developed legal system that there are no secondary materials to which the judge could turn." The former would allow an expert to help determine the law of countries who do not "engage in extensive international commerce." This begs a question of line-drawing. One might assume that a U.S. judge would do his own research of an English-speaking common law system, irrespective of how much "international commerce" flowed through its ports. At the other end of the spectrum, the law of the Congo might be best explained by an expert. In between, as queried by Eugene Volokh, what about a country like Saudi Arabia, which is economically quite significant, but its legal system is so different from ours in many ways that I suspect most judges would want to hear from experts? What would Judges Easterbrook and Posner say about Chinese law, which is also radically different from ours but is an economic powerhouse and is the subject of a good deal of written English-language commentary? Perhaps, in close cases, courts may be more willing to hire their own foreign law experts pursuant to Federal Rule of Evidence 706, as is sometimes done. *See, e.g., Saudi Basic Indust.Corp. v. Mobil Yanbu Petrochemical Co., Inc*., 866 A.2d 1, 30-32 (Del. 2005).