

Léacht Chomhaltacht Beacon D'Arcy McGee

“An Aimsir Chaite, an Aimsir Romhainn: 100 bliain de chearta teanga in Éirinn. Cá bhfuil ár dtriall?”

An Coimisinéir Teanga

D'Arcy McGee Beacon Fellowship Lecture

“Times Past, Times to Come: 100 years of language rights in Ireland. Where to now?”

Rónán Ó Domhnaill
An Coimisinéir Teanga/
Ireland's Irish-language Commissioner

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We find in the 1891 census that 680,000 people in Ireland, or 14.5% of the population, could speak Irish. It is worth mentioning that most of these were native Irish speakers who lived in areas in the west or south of the country where Irish was or had been until recently the community language. That's a world away from today's Gaeltacht.

This represented, however, just the remnants of destruction. Irish was retreating towards the west from the beginning of the nineteenth century, but after the Great Famine in the middle of that century, this retreat turned into a collapse and the number of Irish speakers had fallen by 86% in fifty years. In addition, if the number of young people with Irish is observed it is clear that the language shift had already taken hold in many places where there was a high number of Irish speakers and that Irish was spoken by the older generations only. Many reasons are cited for the language shift that occurred in Ireland and, of course, they all played a part in what happened, but what they share is the power imbalance between the stronger language and the minority language.

In such a situation, people perceive that their native language is insufficient for their employment, educational, social or communication needs in their society and that second language learning is essential for their success and even their survival. The situation of minority language speakers has to be understood in the context of the power and functional inequality between the stronger language and the minority language. This involves circumstantial bilingualism and the result more often than not is a shift of language to the stronger language.

The impact of the State and the institutions of the State on people's lives was instrumental in that process. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the State had little to do with the lives of ordinary people, but gradually the role of the State in the people's lives expanded. Furthermore, education provided opportunities for progression in life and employment prospects existed in the public service. Speaking and writing English was necessary to take advantage of these opportunities and Irish was viewed as superfluous. The administrative language of the State was one of the causes of the language shift.

Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League)



ADVERTISEMENTS.

CONRADH NA GAEOILGE
 45 4, i b-paríete an Coláiríoe, i m-Baile-Aéa-Chiaé.
 Maéosaíón: Dubglar ve h-Ioe, LL.D.

Do cuirfead an cumann go ar bun ar don cois leir an nGaeóilg do
 éongbáil ná labairt i n-Eirinn. Má 'r mian leat Gaeóealg do máirtain i
 mbeulaib Gaeóeal, tabair congnam do réir t' acfainne do'n iarráeé go!

The Gaelic League,
4 COLLEGE GREEN, DUBLIN.
 President: DOUGLAS HYDE, LL.D.

This Association has been founded solely to keep the Irish Language
 spoken in Ireland. If you wish the Irish Language to live on the lips of Irish-
 men, help this effort according to your ability!

The Gaelic Journal, June, 1894

Conradh na Gaeilge was established as a response to this emergency. Unlike the previous Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, Conradh na Gaeilge succeeded in capturing the imagination of the general public and established itself as a mass movement: it numbered one hundred thousand members and nine hundred branches at its peak.

Political Freedom

Cultural nationalism had come strongly to the fore by that time and cultural and linguistic particularity was imagined as a sign of the distinctiveness and identity of a nation with a right of self-determination. Although the entire Irish language movement did not favour linking it with the political movement, nevertheless the Irish language did form part of the ideals of the political and military movement that achieved political freedom for most of the country.

The First Dáil



The Keogh Photographic Collection (The National Library of Ireland Catalogue)

The majority of the signatories of the Proclamation of the Republic were Irish speakers and members of Conradh na Gaeilge and the proceedings of the first meeting of Dáil Éireann in 1919 were held in Irish.

Newly-Established State

The leaders of the new Free State adopted the doctrine of Conradh na Gaeilge and accepted that the revival of Irish was an intrinsic part of the national project. They made Irish the "National Language" in the Free State Constitution, at a time when only about 18% of the State's population could speak Irish, with the percentage actively speaking it at an even lower level.

The academic Pádraig Ó Riagáin outlined four key elements in the State's strategy for Irish:

Objectives for Promoting the Irish Language

1. Protecting and sustaining Irish in the districts where it was still spoken.
2. Increasing the number of Irish speakers in the rest of the country through teaching the language in schools.
3. Promoting the use of Irish in the Public Service, and
4. Standardizing the language and adapting it for use in modern life.

(Ó Riagáin,)

In relation to the Gaeltacht, the Gaeltacht Commission identified in 1926 that Irish as a community language in these areas was declining as rapidly as had been the case under British rule. It is noteworthy that the Commission identified the adverse impact on the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht by public servants with no proficiency in the language while providing public services through English only. Affirmation was given to the necessity for Irish to be the default language between the State and its officials and the people of the Gaeltacht, and for public servants working in the Gaeltacht to be Irish-speaking:

The Gaeltacht Commission (1926)

'In order fully to understand it, one has only to visualise a Garda Síochána barracks of English Speaking Gardaí in the centre of an Irish Speaking district; or a Post Office, in which no one speaks Irish, in an Irish Speaking village; or a non-Irish Speaking official of the Department of Agriculture, or of the Land Commission, or of the Customs and Excise, operating amongst an Irish Speaking population. These officials are direct agents in the spreading and establishment of English.'

(The Gaeltacht Commission, 1926)

The Constitution

It is right and proper, as we look at the question of Irish and the State, to look to the Constitution: As I mentioned, Irish was confirmed as the "National Language" in Article 4 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State.

But article 8 of the Constitution of Ireland in 1937, confirms that Irish, as the national language, is the first official language. The English language is recognised as a "second official language" and Article 8.3 provides that provision may be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes. The revised wording suggests that the constitutional status of the Irish language in the 1937 Constitution was enhanced – a view consistent with a judgment given by Justice Ó hAnluain...:

The Irish Constitution (1937)

"I believe that the provisions of Article 8 of the Irish Constitution are stronger on the recognition of Irish as the first official language of the State than was the case in Article 4 of the Constitution of the Free State."

(ó hAnluain, 1988)

A full separate lecture could be given on the interpretation of the High Court and Supreme Court judges on the meaning of this provision of the Constitution, but it is worth highlighting Judge Hardiman's judgment in the Supreme Court in 2001 as it is consistent with the meaning or understanding, I believe, that anyone would have of the words "first official language":

The Irish Courts

"In my opinion, Irish—being the national language and, at the same time, being the first official language of the State—cannot be excluded (at least in the absence of a law similar to Article 8.3) from any part of the public discourse of the nation or from any official business of the State or of any of its constituent parts.

Nor can it be treated in these contexts in any way that is less favourable than the way in which the second official language is treated. Nor can those who are competent in the language, and wish to use it to express themselves or to communicate, be prevented or disadvantaged in doing so in any national or official context."

(Hardiman, 2001)

It is important, however, to pay attention to a subsequent important judgment of the Supreme Court. In this case, the defendant, a native Irish speaker from the Gaeltacht, claimed that he had the right not only to make his case in the court in the first official language but was also entitled to a jury capable of hearing his case without an interpreter or translation into English. That claim was rejected in the High Court and the Supreme Court confirmed the High Court judgment in a majority decision. The enrolment of jurors with the ability to understand the case in Irish would amount to an exclusion of a significant portion of society as a whole and a jury should be representative of society as a whole.

Hardiman gave the dissenting judgment and stated that there could be no other country on earth where a citizen would not be entitled to conduct his/her business before a court in the national language and in the first official language of that country and to be understood directly by the court in that language.

But can it be understood from this that the State's obligations and the rights of citizens now rely on the relative numbers of Irish speakers and English speakers in the population at any given time? In the words of Judge Clarke:

'While the State, and each of its organs, has an obligation to promote and respect the high status of the Irish language there may, nonetheless, be limitations on an entitlement to have Irish used which derive from the limited use of Irish in ordinary everyday life at least so far as many parts of the country is concerned.'

(Clarke, 2015)



Provisions in Different Pieces of Legislation

My functions as Coimisinéir Teanga include launching an investigation on my own initiative or on foot a complaint made to me to ascertain whether *"any provision of any other enactment relating to the status or use of an official language was not or is not being complied with."* This refers to statutory provisions that are neither contained in the Official Languages Act itself nor come under that Act.

Some of these were minor or symbolic provisions made for Irish and, of course, some of them are no longer in force and have been superseded by other legislation. These statutory provisions – contained in pieces of legislation passed between 1922 and 2015 that were still in operation – were studied by Dr John Walsh, and he identified 197 sections. For the most part I consider that these provisions (and, indeed, the relevant legislation containing no provision for the use of the official languages) mirror the lack of clarity in the State's policy for Irish and the importance of that policy. It would be expected, in a bilingual jurisdiction with language planning objectives and policy, that both those legislative provisions and the legislative corpus would be more consistent and substantial. Many of these provisions are general or conditional provisions where it is difficult to identify the action or activity they are supposed to fulfil and where it is still more difficult to identify with any certainty where they have been breached.

That being said, there are a small number of enactments containing substantive language provisions and these are the provisions most commonly the subject of complaints investigated by my Office which are not subject to the Official Languages Act itself. One of the most important Acts in that category is the Education Act 1998 which provides for the Irish language in the critical sector of education in a variety of ways. Other examples include the Planning and Development Act and the National Cultural Institutions Act. Important provisions are also contained in the Road Traffic Act and the Transport Act 1951 which mainly relate to signs, therefore greatly enhancing the visibility and status of Irish in the eyes of the general public.

The Question of Compulsory Irish in the Civil Service

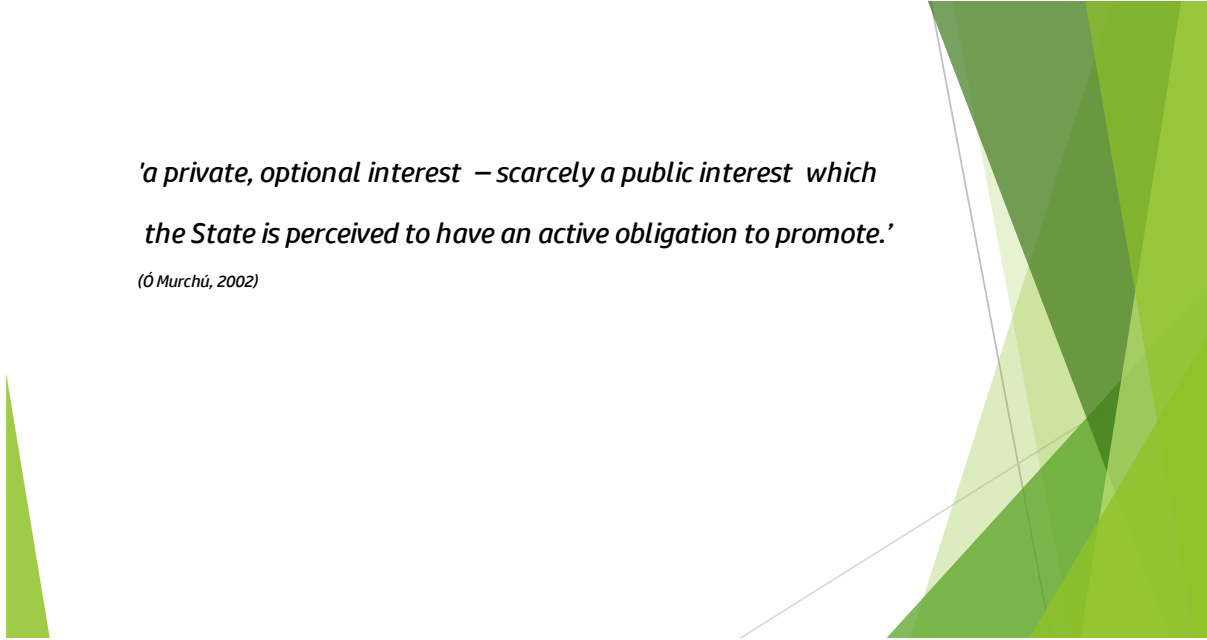
Regarding the administrative system, from 1925 the Irish language was a required subject in the open competitions for general Civil Service grades. Other steps were subsequently taken to increase the number of Civil Servants with competence in Irish and to strengthen that competence. In 1945, for example, a competency test in Irish was conducted for promotion. It is clear that these efforts succeeded, over time, in enhancing the ability of the Civil Service in the Irish language.

What was not done was the implementation of measures for that competence to be utilised. Civil Servants were obliged to maintain and improve their abilities in Irish even if that skill had no function in their normal work practice and despite not having opportunities to use Irish. This may have resulted in a certain amount of resentment and cynicism. The missing ingredient was planning with clear goals for the use of Irish internally and for the provision of services to citizens.

Also necessary was legislation to ensure in practice the right of citizens to carry out their business with the State through Irish. The Irish language entry requirement was ended in 1975 and was replaced by the ability to function in both languages being given a certain advantage in promotion competitions. There is little doubt but that the Irish language capacity of State Departments and the Public Service in general has declined substantially since then.

Change of Direction

That decision should be understood in the context of its time. A change can be seen from 1970 in the attitudes and policies of the State in relation to Irish, and its retreat from language planning – the ending of Irish as an entry requirement for the Civil Service in 1975 being the most obvious signs. *'Benign Neglect'* is how Dr Pádraig Ó Riagáin has summarized the State's attitude to Irish since then. The life of the country was changing dramatically and with economic and social development, the economic, political and cultural relationship with the wider English-speaking world grew considerably in tandem with membership of the European Communities in 1973 and the country's integration with international capitalism. It was assumed that Ireland was an English-speaking country and would continue to be so into the future. And in the words of Máirtín Ó Murchú, if some citizens have benefitted from an interest in the Irish language, it is now deemed to be...



*'a private, optional interest – scarcely a public interest which
the State is perceived to have an active obligation to promote.'*

(Ó Murchú, 2002)

This change of direction is perhaps most obvious in the education sector. Since the establishment of the State most of the pressure to increase the number of primary schools teaching some or all subjects through Irish came from the State itself. By 1950 approximately half the primary schools in the country were teaching in this way. But later, this disappeared away "like the foam on the river", as Sean Ó Riain described it. By 1976 there were only 20 Irish-medium primary schools outside the Gaeltacht. Since then, the promotion of Irish-medium schools has been promoted from the grass roots with apathy or hostility on the part of the State being detected. There have been new and positive developments in this area which I will return to later.

I believe that, when those concerned with the welfare and viability of Irish realized that they and the State were on different trajectories, it was only then that the discourse in those circles concerning language rights and equality began to develop. Some of this was probably under the influence of the civil rights movements of the sixties in this part of the world and further afield. It was felt the State had to be confronted to achieve objectives concerning the welfare of Irish; rights were demanded; protests were held. This is seen in the Gaeltacht Civil Rights movement, the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta in 1972, Údarás na Gaeltachta in 1980, in the campaign for a television service and for an Irish Language Act.

Statement / Strategy / Act

It is noteworthy that the 2002 Gaeltacht Commission Report recommended that the Gaeltacht was not viable in the absence of State policy in relation to Irish and that no such policy was known to exist. A number of significant recommendations were made in the Report which began the process of moving the State on from its aimlessness in relation to Irish language and Gaeltacht policy:

It was recommended that the State make a policy of revitalizing Irish as a national language. In 2006 the Irish Government published the *Statement on the Irish language* in which the Government declared

The Irish Government (Statement on the Irish Language, 2006)

'its support for the development and preservation of the Irish language and the Gaeltacht'

and that

'the objective of Government policy in relation to Irish is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language.'

(Rialtas na hÉireann, 18 Nollaig, 2006)

The Report also recommended the development of a national plan for the Irish language with clear objectives, and the Government subsequently published the 20 Year Strategy for Irish in 2010. Of course, the Strategy has attracted much comment from Irish speakers about its content and its implementation, or lack of, in the intervening years.

A further recommendation made in the Report of the Gaeltacht Commission was an Act to ensure the equality of official languages and the right of citizens to access services through Irish and to appoint a language commissioner for those purposes.

Before moving on, it is worth mentioning, for the sake of completeness, the Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Use of Irish, published in 2007; which highlighted starkly the severe challenges facing the Irish language in the Gaeltacht. That Report was published in 2007 the same year that Irish became an official language of the European Union. The Gaeltacht Act was enacted in 2012; this, in essence, divided the Gaeltacht into separate language planning areas.

Official Languages Act 2003

My own functions as Coimisinéir Teanga are closely related to the Official Languages Act, which I will now discuss. The general objectives of that Act are as follows:

Official Languages Act 2003 (Objectives of the Act)

- *to promote the use of the Irish language for official purposes in the State;*
- *to set out the duties of public bodies in respect of the official languages of the State, and*
- *to establish the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga.*

(Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003)

It is surprising that the Act focuses on the duties of public bodies in respect of the official languages more than the rights of citizens. In summary, the rights of people to use their official language of choice in the courts and in the Houses of the Oireachtas are confirmed, in Part Two. Part Three deals with the language obligations of public bodies including provisions of the Act itself, regulations and language schemes. Part Four concerns the role, functions and powers of An Coimisinéir Teanga and Part Five deals with Gaeltacht placenames and other placenames.

The Act also places certain obligations on State bodies concerning mainly the provision of information – written communications, certain publications, signs and stationery, to mention a few. Clearly it was accepted that public bodies would not be able to or could not afford to provide all their services equally in both languages in one go, and the system of language schemes was introduced to achieve that goal on a phased basis.

A three-year language scheme was to be approved and specific targets identified therein. The second scheme would build on the achievements of the first scheme and, in the course of a number of schemes, the public body would be able to provide all its services in Irish at the same standard of service as in English. The system of schemes, therefore, forms the essence of the Act's approach. I'll return later to how this system failed.

My functions as Coimisinéir Teanga include monitoring the compliance of public bodies with language obligations; I advise these bodies in relation to their language obligations, I advise members of the public about their rights under the Act and I can investigate alleged breaches of language legislation

As I'm on the topic of investigations, I have selected a few cases that I believe are of interest:

Office of the Revenue Commissioners

No appeal has ever been made to the High Court under Section 28 of the Act save one case which was brought by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners in 2013 and heard in 2014. In accordance with Section 9(3) of the Act, if a public body communicates in writing with the general public, or a class of the general public, that communication must be in Irish or in Irish and English. A number of complaints were made when an information booklet on the Local Property Tax was distributed to almost 1.7 million people. This booklet was in English only for most customers although those customers who had registered with the Revenue Commissioners for service through Irish received an Irish-language version. This booklet was in addition to correspondence containing details particular to each individual taxpayer. The investigation carried out during 2013 showed that the Office of the Revenue Commissioners had breached the statutory obligation in relation to the information booklet, although there were no breaches concerning the remainder of the correspondence.

The position of Office of the Revenue Commissioners during the investigation and during the appeal was that the booklet was not issued as a communication under subsection 9(3) of the Act, as it was secondary to the letter and to the Property Tax return issued to individuals which contained specific personal information and that the envelope and its contents should be viewed in their entirety as confidential correspondence with individual taxpayers.

In a judgment given in the High Court in February 2015 the appeal by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners against the decision of the investigation was dismissed; this decision was a great relief to me and it strongly affirmed the statutory obligation that information disseminated to the public must be issued in Irish or in Irish and in English.



Eircode

The postcode system, *Eircode*, and especially the approach taken in relation to the delivery of these postcodes, resulted in the highest ever number of complaints received by my Office concerning one individual topic. I wasn't surprised by the anger felt by people when they received the Eircode postcode: people receiving letters with a translation of their name into English when they had only ever used their name in Irish; Irish-language and Gaeltacht placenames spelt inaccurately or translated into English; highlighting again that the State finds it difficult to deal with communities and individuals in any language except the default language of officialdom: English.

Responsibility for this matter rested with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. The Department had made a commitment that the official Irish versions of Gaeltacht placenames as specified in the Placenames Orders would be used. And, although a contractor was undertaking the work, in accordance with the Act a service provided directly

or indirectly by a public body is encompassed when such service is specified in a language scheme.

The investigation showed that the Department had contravened the Act because this commitment in relation to Gaeltacht placenames had not been met. While I did not find that statutory breaches had occurred in other cases, it was very upsetting to those who contacted my Office that an English translation of their name and address had been used on the Eircode delivery letter. Our name/surname is an integral part of our identity, and no person or organisation should take it upon themselves to anglicize this.

In these and other cases, it could hardly be said that language obligations or the realization of State policies on widening bilingualism as enunciated in the *Statement on the Irish Language* and in the *Twenty Year Strategy for the Irish Language* were primary considerations of State agents. It is fair to surmise, in my opinion, that they resort to minute technical arguments to defend their position rather than identifying what is best for the language.



RTÉ

A quick final example of a significant investigation is one relating to RTÉ, the national broadcaster. An investigation showed that the broadcaster breached the Broadcasting Act which required it to broadcast a comprehensive range of programmes in the Irish language. RTÉ argued that they were fulfilling this commitment, though the investigation showed that the total output of Irish language programming on television was roughly...1%. I found that this was in no way comprehensive, and RTÉ to be fair to them are implementing a plan which is substantially increasing the amount of programmes in Irish on their tv channels...though still well below where they should be.

Constraints

In general, it is true that some progress has been made regarding the provision of information and state services, by virtue of the Act, but as we look back at almost 20 years of the operation of the Act it's fair to say that it didn't deliver as promised.

The language schemes are the main mechanism under the legislation to improve the number, range and standard the services that public bodies provide in Irish. In recent years the quality of language schemes agreed has generally been quite poor, and I asked my officials to carry out a comprehensive analysis of these schemes. In short, the analysis showed that language schemes were operating, in some cases, not as a tool to increase the number of services through Irish but as a mechanism to limit the provision of such services. Often wording was used which meant that there was no strict obligation to provide services in Irish. Even if it were intended to implement the system of language schemes, in the manner originally envisaged, in our contemporary society not all public bodies are independent fiefdoms with which an agreement can be concluded without regard to their complex web of interrelationships with other parties in the public sector and in wider society.

The implementation of the State's policy to provide state services in both official languages must be tackled at a higher level than that of the individual public body.

If there is a reluctance in the wording and commitments of language schemes to give clear commitments to provide services in Irish, it is manifest that the core of the problem is that organizations haven't enough staff (or any staff) with competence in Irish. The bottom line is that services cannot be provided in a language unless the provider of such services is competent in that language. The need and deficit must be identified in terms of the Irish language proficiency of staff in the different sectors of the public service and provision must be made in recruitment policies and strategies for the closing of those gaps including clear targets as well as timescales for meeting such targets.

New Act

There is much talk at the moment about the bill to amend the Official Languages Act; it's at committee stage in the Oireachtas at present. This may be the State's final opportunity to put in place an appropriate, fit-for-purpose and comprehensive system to address the shortfall in the number of people competent in Irish in the Civil and Public Service.

I broadly welcomed the heads of the new Bill, although I highlighted shortcomings in certain areas. A stated objective of the heads is that 20% of new recruits to the public service are to be Irish speakers. It is stated that this will be achieved in the long run. However, a specific target needs to be attached to that objective and those of us wishing to conduct our business with the State through Irish need to feel confident that this target will be achieved.

A system should therefore be established to ensure that a minimum percentage of staff competent in Irish is recruited, that this competency assessment is standardized and that this system is independently monitored. This system must be based on effective planning and accurate information and analysis by which the State identifies its priority services, the arrangements to provide such services, and the human resources required to achieve this objective. With willingness and co-operation this can be accomplished – I truly believe this – but time is passing..

Gaeltacht Crisis

A clear principle should also be laid down in the Act stipulating that state officials based in the Gaeltacht or providing services there would have to be fluent in Irish. Over ninety years have passed since the Gaeltacht Commission first identified this need. The Gaeltacht Commission recognized this again in 2002. When the resolution of this issue was left to the language schemes system in the Act, it was put on the long finger once more.

As a mentioned earlier, the Gaeltacht areas are language planning areas in accordance with the Gaeltacht Act 2012, with the statutory aim of the...

Gaeltacht Act 2012

'increased use of the Irish language in family, educational, public, social, recreational and commercial life'

(Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012)



But, there is little point in discussing language planning if the State is unwilling to do its bit in providing its own services through Irish in the Gaeltacht. On its own, the provision of state services through Irish will not solve the linguistic challenges facing the Gaeltacht but it would reflect determination and leadership and these are badly needed.

Because the matter of most concern is the future of the Gaeltacht. Since Reg Hindley published his famous book in 1990 *The Death of the Irish Language*, researchers have pointed out that the Gaeltacht community is in crisis regarding the role of Irish as the everyday community language and that the Gaeltacht as commonly understood would not survive for

much longer. The statistics from the last census show that there is no escaping this truth. Research also shows that parents, even in the strongest Gaeltacht areas, are finding it increasingly difficult to transmit Irish to their family as a first language in the circumstances in which they live today. In the words of the linguist, Silvina Montrul:

'To summarize, bilingual children, who speak a minority language at home become aware very early in life of the political and social status of the language they speak once they start to socialize beyond the home through childcare, friends and other social interactions.

Even when children are encouraged to use the minority language at home, preference for the majority language is very strong.

When the family language is used less frequently than the majority language by simultaneous bilingual children, it runs the risk of becoming weaker, eventually affecting its vocabulary and grammar.'

(Silvina Montrul, 2008)

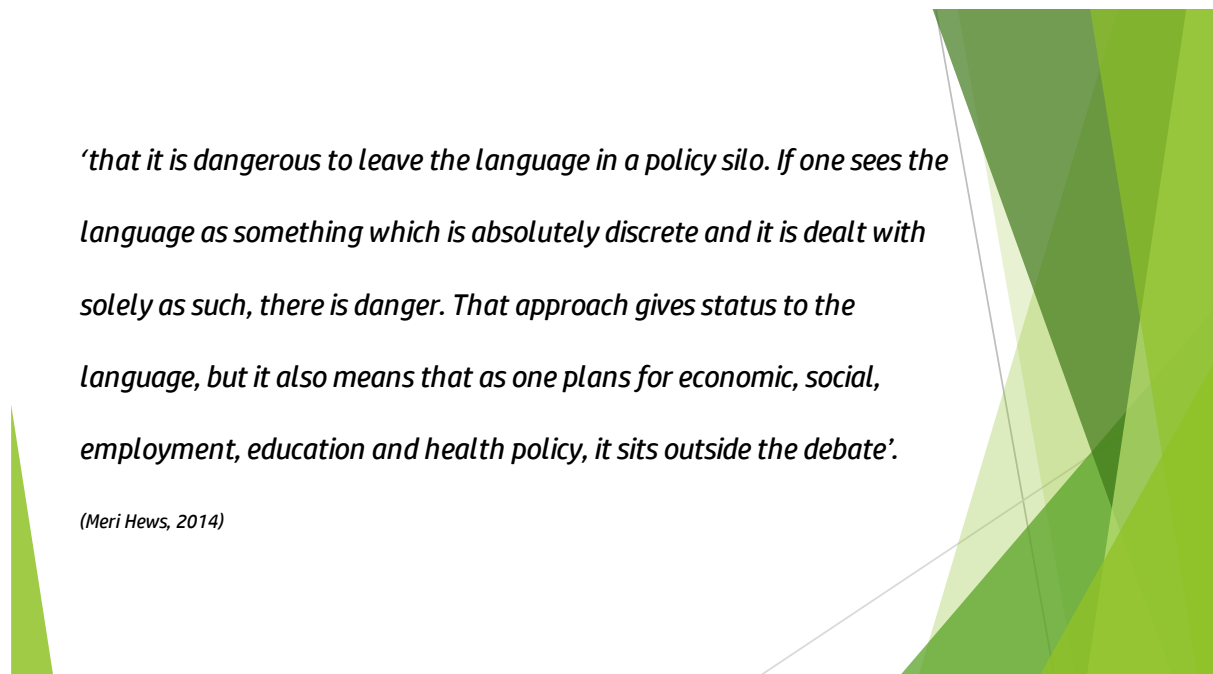
Undoubtedly, the language planning process in the Gaeltacht is faced with significant challenges.

One positive development has been the publication of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education. This was a major step forward with the exceptional circumstances and very complex language conditions in the Gaeltacht being faced up to.

Negligence in State Policies

Every single aspect of a person's personal or interpersonal life affects that person's linguistic behaviour and ability. This means that the different aspects of the language planning question are limitless. I will remain for my conclusion “on my own turf”, as Coimisinéir Teanga.

The former Welsh Language Commissioner, Meri Hews, addressed a parliamentary committee in Ireland where she expressed the opinion:



‘that it is dangerous to leave the language in a policy silo. If one sees the language as something which is absolutely discrete and it is dealt with solely as such, there is danger. That approach gives status to the language, but it also means that as one plans for economic, social, employment, education and health policy, it sits outside the debate.’

(Meri Hews, 2014)

From my experience as Coimisinéir Teanga, I fear that the Irish language is often omitted from major State policies, and from the implementation of these policies.

There are people who are brought up through Irish or who take on an identity as Irish speakers wishing to use Irish as much as possible in their daily lives. The stated aim of the State is to dramatically increase this linguistic community. These people, of course, live in the same society as the majority who do not speak the language. Therefore, a “living space”, a “breathing space”, must be created for that community within society. When the Irish

language is disregarded in the State's policies and activities, the functionality of Irish as a person's language of choice could be adversely affected and the State's objective could even be thwarted, even if this is not deliberate.

If the citizen chooses to use Irish this option should be as convenient as possible and that person should not be disadvantaged in any way by making that choice, particularly in any area influenced by the State. This is the least that is required.

Review

Since our attention is often drawn to difficulties and omissions, it is worth looking back at what has been achieved. I suspect that not many in the nineteenth century would have believed that Irish would be a living language in the twenty-first century nor that it would be a community language in any part of the country.

Almost 1.7 million people, or 40% of the population, claim to have some ability to speak the language and one third of these (or 17% of the entire population) indicate that they speak Irish – thanks mainly to the education system – even if this is infrequent in many cases.

Irish is a modern language adapted for use in any area of life, high or low. In addition, it enjoys status under national law and European law, in the broadcasting and print media, in the education system and in the life of the country generally, being the envy of much larger language communities. These feats are remarkable, *miraculous*, and the State itself was central, at times, in their achievement.

Research has demonstrated the goodwill of Irish society as a whole towards the Irish language and the space and circumstances in which Irish can survive or flourish as a living language will be created with the support and co-operation of the wider community. Ireland is a liberal democracy that has become largely mature. We are proud of this and with good reason. We greatly value the richness of our society in terms of its diversity, inclusivity, and compassion.

If these values are important to us, the discussion about Irish will have to be framed in terms of these values. In the context of such a discourse the public will have the opportunity to give a fairer hearing to the needs and requirements of the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities. That we all benefit from Irish being a living language and that all of us – in Ireland and across the world – would be diminished by the native language of this island not being spoken any more.

It needs to be widely understood that Irish is a living language and that society should provide for and create space for the language so that people, quite simply, can speak it...amongst themselves and with the state.



Ceisteanna?

CRÍOCH

Go raibh maith agaibh!

