
Mr P Morgan
Bord na Gaidhlig
Darach House
Stoneyfield
Inverness
IV2 7PA

Comments on The Draft National Plan for Gaelic

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act requires Bord na Gaidhlig to prepare and publish a national plan designed to ensure the survival of Gaelic. Publication of the Plan is therefore a legal requirement. As such, it seems to have been concluded that the Plan does not have to be justified at length. Supporting argument for the Plan has therefore been confined to drawing attention to the continuing decline of the Gaelic speaking population, already a well-publicised fact.

The Plan explains what needs to be done and by who. **Why** anyone needs to do anything is treated as self-evident. This may not be the best approach if individuals and organisations are to be convinced that their active participation is not only desirable but is essential if the plan's outcomes are to be delivered.

The Plan emphasises the roles of organisations, including those social units known as "home" and "community". The role of the individual is acknowledged, more or less in passing. The individual Gaelic speaker is the Plan's most needed asset. Ignoring that fact undervalues the asset and undermines the Plan. Given the prevalence of language "reticence" the Plan needs to boost the individual's importance for Plan delivery. It is vital to show that Mr & Mrs Gaelic Speaker, and their problems, are not being taken for granted.

This leads to the difficult question. What will motivate old and young alike to abandon their negative outlooks on Gaelic? Who or what can persuade them to change that frame of mind? The Plan may not be the forum in which to discuss difficult motivational issues in detail but it does need strengthening in terms of explaining why the Plan itself is necessary if it is to command respect and support.

The State is now the dominant force in all aspects of Gaelic language policy and activities. Appendix II organisations know how true this is. The absence of independent self-supporting language organisations is striking and is indicative of the malaise that prevails. While the State has become responsible for keeping Gaelic alive, Gaelic speakers themselves have detached themselves from this task. This will remain the case unless they can be inspired to accept responsibility when the Plan is being implemented.

The residents of streets, villages, or whatever need to "own" their own individual plans. Responsibility for keeping a language alive ultimately rests with those who speak it. In a sense the Plan should be seen as the process of giving the language back to its people

The notion that others are responsible for Gaelic's long-term decline finds a home on page seven of the Draft Plan where it is stated that-

Gaelic speakers are used to a world in which their language is not valued by non-speakers and not valued by some of the most powerful institutions which impact on their daily lives.

This can be read as politicking at the expense of some members of COSLA or the maligned Edinburgh civil service. If that is the case, it will hardly generate the sympathy or full-hearted compliance that is obviously being sought after.

On a more general note, it may be an attempt to assert that Gaelic is or should be a key component of the Scottish identity. It is debatable if such was ever actually the case on terms that would be meaningful today. If, on the other hand, it is being said that Gaelic should now, like the kilt and the pipes, be embedded in the national identity, thought needs to be as to how that might be achieved. A combination of intellectual support, nationalist politics, and open rebellion paved the way for that to happen in Ireland. What is likely to be the most fruitful recipe for Scottish Gaelic?

The notion that one language is superior to another has been with us since the Ancient Greeks. Language suppression as a means of establishing control has been practised on all five continents and not just in Scotland, as some seem willing to suggest. While Gaelic has suffered because of these two factors, it should be remembered that cultural cleansing in Scotland also had other targets. Traditional dancing was frowned upon. Scottish history was taboo in schools and for over a century the educational system has sought to expurgate the Scots language.

Insensitivity to what we now regard as just and obvious should therefore be judged against a background in which the nation's leaders, lay and clerical, sought to improve and control civil society at the expense of what were perceived to be disorderly and undesirable elements. Blaming contemporary Scots and their institutions for the consequences of a historical process they are hardly aware of does not seem to be best way of winning the friends Gaelic so badly needs.


Jack Kinahan

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