

# Education Scotland Conference.

## Gaelic In a European Context.

### 9 June 2015.

Good Afternoon Everyone,

It is good to be here and I want to thank Education Scotland and especially Joan Esson for inviting me.

For the past two years I have been in the fortunate position of representing the UK on the Committee that monitors Minority Language developments in Europe. Gaelic is one of the languages that is protected under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The work of the Committee involves reporting on how countries throughout Europe meet the responsibilities of the Charter; scrutinising these reports; and then presenting them to the Council for Europe for approval by Ministers.

As many of you will know I have been involved with Gaelic and its development for many years. So, from my point of view, the main advantage of sitting on this committee in Strasbourg and travelling to various countries throughout Europe is that it gives me the opportunity to compare what happens in other countries with what is happening with Gaelic in Scotland. I want, therefore, to spend the time I have this afternoon to look at where we are with Gaelic, explore if we can learn from other countries and, indeed, explore how other countries can learn from us.

First, let's look at the context. Where does Gaelic lie in the European context? Gaelic is in a vulnerable state. Last year's report from the Council of Europe was quite clear in its assessment. 'Scottish Gaelic' it said 'remains an endangered language'. Despite the Renaissance of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Census of 2011 did not bring good news. According to the National Census there are only 57,000 Gaelic speakers left in Scotland; the same Census told us that there were 55,000 people from Poland now living in Scotland. We make up only 1% of the population. That's where we are.

Yet, despite that, I have to say that we do well compared to other countries. As Gaels, we are very good at putting ourselves down. We shouldn't be. Our story is a good one.

In Scotland, we have the language recognised in statutory terms. The Gaelic Language Act of 2005 gave us that status; many in Europe would like that and don't have it. My own view is that the most important effect of the Act has been to raise the awareness of the language in Scotland as a whole. It is sometimes difficult to understand how important it is to keep raising awareness. You only have to look at countries like Serbia and Slovenia to see how you can hide a minority language. Or at least, make sure that you do not recognise the rights of the speakers of minority languages.

What about media provision? Well, we have a media service in Gaelic that is better than anything I can see anywhere else. We have a dedicated radio station, Radio nan Gaidheal, and our own TV channel, BBC Alba. We can complain about the programmes and what we are offered but we have the service. It's a service that you cannot find in other European minorities.

I have just returned from the Czech Republic where the Polish, German and Romani minorities would give anything to have our service. The Polish people get 10 minutes every Sunday on radio at 6am.

Despite all the reports you read in the media we have a policy on signage that is far superior to many other countries. In almost every report arguments still rage about signage. Even a country like Denmark has huge problems in accepting that signs should be bilingual in certain areas. The Danish people do not like German to appear on signs.

People have the right to use Gaelic in areas of public life in Scotland in a way that other people do not. There are challenges in this area, for example, providing care for the elderly in their first language. Nevertheless, the right is there.

Above all, we have cross party political support which has been critical to the recent development of the language. That is as true of Westminster as it is of Holyrood. I cannot stress how important that is. It has been absolutely fundamental to the developments that we have seen in Gaelic in the last 25 years. When you witness the political struggles that languages can cause and you can see that clearly in another part of the UK – Northern Ireland, you realise how fortunate we have been in Scotland. In Europe itself you can best see these problems in the old Yugoslavia – in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia. But you also see it other countries where the language becomes part of the political strife. That must not be allowed to happen here. Gaelic must not become something that politicians use for their own narrow uses. And, to be fair, politicians in Britain have been very supportive of Gaelic.

So, in the Gaelic world we should be proud of what we have achieved. But there are difficulties and there are common difficulties. You see them in different European countries. All of us in Europe face similar challenges.

Today we are looking at education. Let us, therefore, examine in a bit of detail some of the challenges that are common to us all and have become apparent to me. They will also be apparent to all of you but what I am saying is that they also exist throughout Europe.

First, the widespread acceptance of English as the 'lingua franca' not just of Europe but of the world. English is now spoken in all countries and taught to children as one of the compulsory subjects in schools. In many European countries pupils are fluent in English before they leave Primary Schools and that poses huge threats to minority languages. English has become the second language and that's what Bilingualism means in Europe. What does it mean in Scotland?

Mandarin is beginning to become more and more powerful as the other International language. One argument is that by the end of this century the world will be dominated by both English and Mandarin. That is why it is so important to ensure that small communities with their own cultures and languages survive in a world where 'globalisation' is becoming a part of our lives.

There may be a connection between e.g. the power of English and another difficulty - the decline in the numbers of native speakers in traditional areas where the language used to be strong. We saw that very clearly in the Census results of 2011 in Scotland where the statistics from the Highlands and Islands were not good. But it is not something that is unique to Scotland. We can see it happening at the moment in many European countries. I have just

returned from the Czech Republic where there is evidence that the same is happening to the German minority there.

Let me now look at another common difficulty which I think is important. How successfully and how effectively are we delivering Technical and Vocational Education in the mother tongue in our schools and colleges? When young people go to follow apprenticeships do we have a strategy that ensures that they are using their native language? I do not think so and yet this group of people are vital to the health of the language in the future. They are usually the people who will stay at home and not travel. They will become the traditional community of the future. The Committee of Experts in Strasbourg are very worried about this part of the education system in Europe as a whole. There are few countries that still have separate schools for this kind of education. We do not have separate schools or provision in Scotland. It is a big challenge.

Yet another common difficulty is the reluctance of young people to see the benefits of a minority language. Again this is not just a Scottish phenomenon. Look at what is happening in the Republic of Ireland.

Let me now look at social media. At the moment, social media is a threat to a language like Gaelic. Why? Because Gaelic exists in a community where most people cannot read or write the language. My own view is that this, together with teacher shortages, is probably the greatest challenge now facing education systems as they try to keep minority languages alive. In Gaelic, for example, we have a community which has been and remains largely illiterate in its own language. Yet we have a young population that is using social media as their means of communication; and the language they use is English. I am worried that, in this new world, minority languages simply become a subject that is taught at school and not used afterwards.

Let me finish by giving a few minutes to the biggest challenge that Minority languages face throughout Europe today – the shortage of teachers, especially in the Secondary Schools. It is a real problem and one that we have to solve. We must start to discuss what happens in secondary schools with the encouragement and development of young talent; an examination of how we develop the idea of a Gaelic Recruitment Officer; how do we target teaching resources; how do we train teachers; where do we train teachers; how do we create a career structure; how do we use the probationary system; etc., etc. There is no easy solution. But the time has come to look at this difficulty openly. We need to find our own solution. It's not waiting for us in other countries. That's why we need a group of interested people to get together and come up with ideas that we can look at. We do not have a strategy at the moment; yet we desperately need one.

And finally, I have always believed that Gaelic Medium Education is at the heart of the survival of the language. As someone who was involved in Scottish Education at the time, I am proud of what was achieved and continues to be achieved in Scotland. The development of GME in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century added greatly to the reputation of Scottish Education. It was a great success story and we must continue that story.

The changes in Gaelic Education that we have seen in the last 25/30 years were initiated by parents who were helped hugely by Comunn na Gaidhlig. Changes did not come from the system. But to be fair the system responded to the voice of the Gael and we need to hear the voice of the Gael again. It has been muted for a few years now. How do they do this in other

European countries? They meet together. Some of the minorities are particularly good at doing this – the Germans in Denmark; the Serbians in Montenegro; the Poles in the Czech Republic. They meet, they discuss and they make recommendations to their Governments or their local councils.

As Gaels we need to meet much more often than we do. We need to talk about our language and feel that we have a voice in the conclusions that are reached about it. That is why I thank those who organised today. We need more of these in the Gaelic world. At one time we had CNAG's Annual Conference. We need something like that again, not just to talk about education but about all the other subjects that affect our language.

So, the message from Europe as far as I can see is that we do very well in comparison to other languages which have far more speakers than we do. There are difficulties and it is comforting to know that other languages face similar problems.

I believe also that fundamental to the development of the language is Education. I want all of you listening today, who spend your professional lives in the world of Gaelic Education, that we, on the periphery, value what you do, will support you whenever and wherever we can and thank you very much for what you do to keep this precious language alive and healthy. As far as I am concerned, you are all heroes.  
Thank you.

Matthew M. Maclver.  
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