

COR NA GAIDHLIG

LANGUAGE, COMMUNITY AND DEVELOPMENT:

THE GAELIC SITUATION

A report prepared for the Highlands and Islands Development Board,
with recommendations for action

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SECTION 5: LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT

73.01 The decline of Gaelic has usually been examined simply as a matter of linguistic decay, and usually in crude statistical terms. But the decay of something as fundamental to a community as its language must have wider effects on the community as part of the general cycle of decline, being in some degree cause as well as effect. It is, of course, an area of immense complexity where simple yardsticks are hard to come by. A leading authority in this field, Dr Thomas Lunden of Stockholm University, has advised the group: "The problem is, of course, that neither linguistic nor community decline can easily be measured along any simple linear scale. Measuring the relationship between these two factors is, of course, still more difficult."

73.02 But these difficulties do not permit us to dismiss the issue. Throughout history there is considerable evidence of co-incidence between the linguistic decay and the social and economic disintegration of communities. In the case of Gaeldom the linguistic decline of the past two hundred years has co-incided with periods of intense hardship and a general economic decline. If that economic decline has been stemmed to some extent in recent years, it should also be noted that this has coincided with a period of heightened linguistic awareness. Since an increasing number of bodies take pragmatic decisions based on such co-incidence, and since it is increasingly becoming a matter for international research and thus offers potentially beneficial global linkages, it is a matter which should increasingly exercise development authorities in the Highlands.

Linguistic Stress in the Community

74.01 That such linguistic decay leads to individual, and hence to communal, stress is attested from sources outwith the Highlands. Dr Lunden informs us that such a situation exists in Northern Sweden, where Finnish is spoken as a native community language. "Having studied the linguistic situation there, both Finnish and Swedish socio-linguists point at the fact that speaking a native language which has a low position in official society is very detrimental to the self-esteem of individuals.....If the local language is given proper recognition, part of this stress will be relieved." He goes on to say that the main problem here lies in the linkage between linguistic problems and self-esteem. "People with a low faith in themselves will not readily admit it. Both in Finnish-speaking Sweden and in Slovene Carinthia, many native speakers denounce all attempts to restore the language on the ground that 'we speak it all the same' or 'it is valuable as a local dialect, but it has no relation to the official Finnish (or Slovene) dialect.'" Similar testimony to Dr Lunden's can be found in other minority linguistic situations.

74.02 There seems no reason why Gaeldom should escape this stress, and the available evidence suggests it does not do so. Possibly the most trenchant statement of the individual tension produced came in the poet Murdo MacFarlane's statement to the camera crew in BBC Bristol's television programme "But still we sing..". He told them: "I envy you people because you're not faced with our problem. That is the problem of a language and a culture, its demise stark-naked facing you now ... It's really a soul-killing thought to think that the language you're composing in, the language of your fathers and ancestors - that it's disappearing. It's really a soul-searing thought to think of it ... Just imagine if you were going home tonight and you were saying to yourself: 'The language I'm speaking will be dead in another sixty years'. Just imagine yourselves in my position. It's so discouraging you see." Not every Gael has Mr MacFarlane's heightened sensibility, and certainly few have his ability to express it, but the tension he delineates is, at varying levels of individual consciousness, an ever-present reality for the modern Gael and his community. The

escape routes are many, from angrily plastering English signs to a bitter rejection of all things Gaelic.

74.03 That individual and communal linguistic stress is probably the most difficult factor of the minority linguistic situation for the monoglot English-speaker - secure in his linguistic environment, whatever other stresses his society may have - to understand. But the symptoms of which it is at least a partial cause, in terms of depression, suspicion, and resistance to progressive developmental ideas, are ones to which most people involved in development in the Highlands, whether monoglot or bilingual, can testify.

74.04 It is obviously impossible to isolate the degree of linguistic stress amongst the compound of general socio-economic stresses which forces people to choose out-migration as an escape-route. But it is entirely reasonable to suppose that it plays a part, and a particularly heightened role in "frontier" communities where linguistic decay is most advanced. Such "frontier" communities, historically on the eastern fringes of the Highlands, now extend throughout the whole Gaelic community, as we have already observed. Thus it would be prudent to expect an intensification of linguistic stress, offset only by the degree to which authorities have responded to the demand for enhanced status for Gaelic and, more importantly, the degree to which they will respond in future.

Language As A Communal Cement

75.01 The idea of a language as a form of communal cement is one which should transcend the gulf in perspective between monoglot and bilingual. There is generally held to be an English-speaking (or, for that matter, Spanish-speaking or French-speaking) community which transcends national boundaries over a generality of considerations, though national interests can, from time to time, breach it. Similarly, a minority language also binds common interests. The difference between the majority and minority situation is not of kind, but of degree and scale.

75.02 An extreme case of Gaelic as a binding force in the community is referred to in the Napier Commission's report on crofting conditions (1884). It comes in the context of the Commission's consideration of how the "illiberal prejudice" against Gaelic in schools has, paradoxically, led to many Gaels being illiterate in English. In the opinion of the Commission: "Their inability to (speak English) necessarily unfitted them for competition in the labour market, and made them less willing to seek their fortune in other parts of the world. This is, in fact, the chief reason why so many of the inhabitants of the remote Highlands and Islands are more home-keeping and averse to migration than their fellow-countrymen in districts where the same difficulty does not prevail."

75.03 The foregoing paragraph is, as we have said, an extreme case where the individual is portrayed as being trapped within a community through his lack of knowledge of a major language, and no one would advocate such a limitation as an answer to modern community decay and depopulation. (Though it should be noted in passing that the situation could also have been presented in positive terms as that of individuals being able to participate fully in their community through their knowledge of its language.) But it does lead us to consideration of the case of the individual who has linguistic access to both the minority and majority culture, and makes a conscious decision to remain within the territory of the native minority culture. That such individuals did, and do, exist is beyond contention. Since, in our case, Gaelic is one of the key ingredients in the cultural package that influenced the decision the language can be seen to have acted as a brake on depopulation. And to the extent that a brake on depopulation is an element in positive economic and social development so also can the language be seen as having a role in development policies.