

**SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY**

**Towards a Comprehensive Irish Language Policy**

**Submission to the Liaison Sub-Committee on  
Confidence-Building Measures**



## **Basic Principles**

1. The SDLP believes that the Irish language is inextricably part of the cultural heritage of all of the people of Ireland, North as well as South. It is particularly so for people of the nationalist tradition for whom the language is an essential element to their sense of identity.
2. The SDLP is also convinced of the importance of cultural pluralism to the positive development of community relations and of the value of multilingualism as sources of creativity and believes that the encouragement and promotion of both enriches the whole of society.
3. Parity of linguistic esteem for Irish should not, therefore, be seen as a threat to any individual or to the values of any community. On the contrary, esteem for the Irish language and its cultural heritage should be seen as contributing to the cultural diversity and richness of all communities.
4. Parity of linguistic and cultural esteem is a basic civil right which should be safeguarded. It is a right which is recognised internationally to the point where an obligation to protect, promote and develop minority languages and cultures is widely accepted. The UN 'Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities' is a particularly pertinent example of the international community's attitudes. The CSCE and the EU have also published important declaration's along similar lines.



## Background

In pre-plantation Ulster Irish was the people's vernacular throughout the whole of province. English and Lallans were introduced from the seventeenth century and with the suppression of Gaelic civilisation Irish entered a long period of decline with English replacing it as the language of government and of the administration.

The language revival movement which gradually developed in strength and popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century attracted considerable cross-community support. Prominent members of the Gaelic League and of its northern branch, Comhaltas Uladh, came from all sides of the community demonstrating the essentially non-sectarian and non-party political outlook of the revival movement. However, perceptions that the revival movement was becoming too closely associated with a narrow and exclusive interpretation of Irish nationalism undoubtedly did have negative effects on some of that cross-community involvement and support.

In the North of Ireland, post-1921 unionist policies and attitudes became extremely hostile to Irish with the result that the language received no official recognition. It was likewise the case for the whole cultural tradition most intimately associated with the language. The contrary was the case in the South where the language began to enjoy a considerable degree of recognition and support both from official and non-official sources.

In the North, not only was official recognition and support absent but, in addition, official hostility attempted to inhibit and constrain the development of the language. Several attempts were made to restrict the teaching of Irish in schools in the hope that it would cease altogether. Public life afforded the language no recognition while even the use of Irish language street names was prohibited by law. The use of Irish for the conduct of any official business was refused by administrative practice while courts declined to permit Irish in any proceedings.

Despite official efforts to deny Irish any meaningful status and support, the language retained considerable support, some of a more or less passive kind, other of a very active kind within the nationalist community in particular. Language classes continued to attract considerable number of participants, *feiseanna* flourished, Gaeltacht summer schools maintained steady enrolments while many primary and secondary schools maintained their commitment to teaching Irish. It is not surprising, therefore, that when a question on Irish was re-introduced into the 1991 census of population that 142,003 people indicated some knowledge of the language. Of that number 45,338 indicated that they could speak the language; 10,029 that they could only read the language; 86, 636 that they could both read and write the language.

Some of this knowledge of Irish can be attributed to the recent and very significant growth of interest in and commitment to the language. The establishment of a network of Irish language nursery schools, *naiscoileanna*, of Irish language primary schools and Irish streams in existing primary schools as well as the provision of Irish medium second level education are amongst the most obvious manifestations of this interest and commitment. Further evidence is to be seen in emergence of an Irish language presence in the media, print and broadcast, and in the expansion of Irish language studies in universities and colleges of further education.

Supporting this renewal and revival is a high degree of voluntary and popular commitment which is gradually spreading to include people from all communities, unionist as well as nationalist. In recognition of and in response to this commitment, official action has been stirred into action, but as yet with far too much caution, uncertainty and negativity.



## **A New Framework of Cultural and Language Rights**

Over the past fifteen years a new and more positive rights framework has been evolving, at the centre of which is a new understanding of the need to respect, promote and foster cultural diversity. As a central element in the culture of any community, a major responsibility now exists to ensure that language related activities are fostered, especially in the case of a language like Irish which previously lacked significant official recognition and support, not to mention official attempts at suppressing it altogether. This framework also provides a clear guide for assessing official policies and actions towards Irish.

### **Anglo-Irish Agreement**

Commitments entered into with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement include recognition and respect for the cultural rights of both major traditions in Northern Ireland. According to Article 5 of the Agreement the Intergovernmental Conference 'shall concern itself with measures to recognise and accommodate the rights and identities of the two traditions in Northern Ireland, to protect human rights and to prevent discrimination. Matters to be considered in this area include measures to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions...'

### **Downing Street Declaration**

In Par.4 of this Declaration both governments state 'The role of the British government will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland...The British government believe that the people of Britain would wish, in friendship to all sides, to enable the people of Ireland to reach agreement on how they live in harmony and partnership, **with respect to their diverse traditions.**'

For this statement to be fully meaningful an obligation to adopt a pro-active cultural rights policy is evident.

### **Frameworks for Agreement**

The frameworks document emphasises that '...any new political arrangements must be based on full respect for, and protection and expression of, the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland and even-handedly afford both communities in Northern Ireland parity of esteem and treatment....'

Once again the cultural dimension is stressed in a way that requires pro-active policies.

### **The European Dimension**

The new framework of cultural and language rights owes a great deal in its conception and development to wider international influences. Within the UN, the CSCE and in very particular ways within the context of the European Union, approaches to such rights have been significantly developed over recent decades. Within the European Parliament, the SDLP leader, John Hume, tabled a motion on minority languages which led to the establishment of the Arfe Committee whose report was given full support by the European Parliament. A major outcome was the adoption of a minority languages' charter and the establishment of the Bureau for Minority Languages with a brief to protect and foster such languages throughout the EU.



Highlighting the basic rights of minority language users Dr Ferdinando Albanese of the Council of European Local Authorities stated:

'Although the Charter does not grant individual rights but proposes to States to adopt positive internal legal measures, I would say that, broadly speaking, the Charter aims at satisfying four fundamental rights for speakers of a regional or minority language:-

- (a) the right to exist;
- (b) the right to keep their personal identity and culture;
- (c) the right to communicate to others their own cultural wealth;
- (d) the right to dignity.'

**Assessing official approaches and actions towards the Irish language in Northern Ireland against this new framework of cultural rights the SDLP can only conclude that there exists no clear set of policies to encourage, promote and enhance respect for, knowledge about and use of the Irish language.**

Evidence for this is discussed in the next section which begins with some comparisons between approaches to and treatment of Irish, Ghaidhlig and Welsh.



## Some Comparisons with Ghaidhlig and Welsh

In evidence of the uncertainty and indeed of the negativity characteristic of official approaches to Irish, it is useful to note official approaches to and treatment of the other two main Celtic languages in these islands, Ghaidhlig and Welsh.

In Scotland, the 1991 census recorded 69,976 people who claimed knowledge of Ghaidhlig. Public expenditure in support of Ghaidhlig in 1994-5 amounted to £11,133,000 of which £8,700,000 was in support of Ghaidhlig medium television.

In the same year, expenditure in support of Irish in Northern Ireland amounted to £2,022,115 inclusive of expenditure on Irish medium schools (school expenditure is not included in the Scottish figure).

These figures amount to an expenditure of £14.24 per person with a knowledge of Irish in Northern Ireland. In Scotland the comparable figure is £159.09. The comparison speaks for itself.

The pro-active approach to Ghaidhlig and much more passive approach to Irish which the above figures reveal, reflects the contrasting official policies towards both languages acknowledged in his response to a parliamentary question by Sir Wyn Roberts, Secretary of State for Wales:

"My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Scotland supports the Gaelic language and culture by providing grants (a) to education authorities to provide Gaelic medium education; (b) for the making of TV programmes in Gaelic; and (c) to cultural organisations committed to maintaining and developing the use of the language. It is hoped that these measures will lead to an increase in the use of Gaelic in Scotland. The Government recognises that the Irish language is an important part of the cultural heritage of many people in Northern Ireland. The Government manifest respect for the special importance of the language of those people, encourage interest in it and appreciation of it for its own sake rather than any political connotations, and seek to highlight the contribution that the language has made to the cultural heritage of the whole community."

Irish is to be merely respected and an interest in it encouraged whereas the policy towards Ghaidhlig is directed at increasing its use.

With respect to Welsh the British government has adopted a very pro-active policy. For example, within formal education it is required that all pupils, not just those for whom Welsh is their first language, have some experience of the language. Welsh, according to the Government is "an important component of a broadly balanced curriculum...in English-speaking areas all pupils should be given the opportunity of acquiring a sufficient command of Welsh to allow for communication in Welsh, while bilingual education should be available to pupils whose parents desire it for them".

The consequences are evident in the support available for Welsh medium schools. In Glamorgan, for example, where Welsh is spoken by no more than approximately 9% of the population, a school has been permitted where only 25 pupils were enrolled. It is general policy to provide a second Welsh medium school once an enrolment in an existing school exceeds 200.



## **Irish Medium Schools and the Teaching of Irish in English Medium Schools**

The growth in demand for Irish medium education has been one of the most obvious signs of development and expansion affecting Irish in recent years. Evidence in the South, in Wales and in Scotland have demonstrated very clearly that education through the medium of a second language has many positive benefits. Many parents in Northern Ireland have also begun to value education received through Irish and as evidence accrues to demonstrate the positive benefits of Irish medium education the demand for school places will increase accordingly. To date, however, the Department of Education has displayed, at best, what can be described as only a very lukewarm response to this development and, at times, appears even hostile to Irish medium education.

Strict and prohibitive criteria are applied in the case of new schools: predicted enrolments of at least 15 per year class over several years are required at primary level; at secondary level annual enrolments of approximately 60 per year class are required. Applied to Irish medium schools these criteria pose major problems and are in effect inhibiting genuine and determined efforts by parents and others to provide Irish medium education at primary and secondary levels.

It should be noted that, notwithstanding these criteria, some schools in the controlled and maintained sectors, no doubt for special and justifiable reasons, are allowed to remain in operation with enrolments far below what these figures would require over the seven years of primary and the five years of secondary schooling.

This situation suggests an official attitude which, to say the least, is only minimally and grudgingly supportive of Irish medium education. Indeed, it reflects something of the attitude contained in Dr Brian Mawhinney's remark made during the course of the debates on the Education Reform Order (1989) 'I don't want children to be disadvantaged by learning Irish'.

Notwithstanding Dr Mawhinney's attitudes and thanks mainly to concerted campaigning by language groups and political parties and through the intervention of the Intergovernmental Conference, some steps were taken to improve the position of Irish within the education system. The adoption of **Programmes of Study** for use in Irish medium schools is acknowledged as a major advance.

However, the constraints placed on second language teaching in **English medium primary schools**, prevents the introduction of Irish at a stage when many children are very receptive to learning a second language. Evidence in other jurisdictions of the success of second language learning at this stage points to the very questionable case advanced by DENI for discouraging second languages at primary level.

At **second level**, the requirement that schools must offer at least one other second language if it is intended to offer Irish, effectively puts Irish into a lower status than other languages. It is hardly a measure which could be said to be in the spirit of the approach called for in the European Charter on Minority Languages.

In **third level education** there has been a very significant growth in the numbers pursuing courses in Irish and Irish language related studies over the past twenty years. The result is to be seen in the increasingly large pool of highly educated graduates proficient in Irish and available to contribute to the use and development of a wide range of activities, economic and well as cultural, in which Irish can play a central role. However, there are gaps, most particularly with respect to the training of teachers for Irish medium education as well as for Irish in English medium schools.



## Irish in public life

While educational policies provide a major touchstone for evaluating and assessing official approaches to Irish other areas of public life provide other evidence as to how such policies are being developed and implemented.

The SDLP acknowledges that the establishment of **Iontaobhas Uladh** (Ultach Trust) has been a positive move and that it contains the potential for positive developments in fostering and promoting the Irish language.

However with its present low level of funding, Iontaobhas Uladh is not likely to achieve its aims and objectives and therefore the hopes and expectations placed in it within a reasonable time scale and with the effectiveness necessary to ensure success.

The **broadcasting media** have also begun to take some steps to acknowledge and provide a role for Irish medium programmes. The SDLP welcomes these initiatives but again believes that the full potential for Irish medium is not yet being tapped. A pool of expertise and talent is now available to assist with the production of Irish programmes both for sound and television broadcasting which if provided with local outlets could become a resource with economic benefits as well.

Within the **public service** recognition for Irish is minimal. Irish cannot be used in order to transact any public business. At best, correspondence received in Irish will be responded to, but only in English despite the fact that there is most probably quite a number of people within the public services with some knowledge of Irish. With proper encouragement many of these could become available to assist in the conduct of business through Irish.

Public signs in Irish are now only legal for **street names** for the past year and are not encouraged even in areas where they would be welcomed.

In the **Arts**, some progress is being recorded at last in terms of support for Irish language and related cultural activities. The SDLP acknowledges the progress being achieved. Once again the potential for development is very significant and the benefits are likely to be seen in terms of community relations and economic benefits as well as in terms of the benefits to the language itself.

In other respects Irish is hardly visible in the public life of Northern Ireland. Opportunities, for example, exist to highlight Irish as part of the heritage of our society in promoting tourism, but have not been taken. As part of our cultural heritage Irish can have an appeal and a value which merits development in this vital area of our economy.



## Official Timidity

In the light of the evidence reviewed above, the SDLP is forced to conclude that official policies towards Irish are characterised by a high degree of timidity and faintheartedness, only a slight movement away from the outright hostility which persisted until recent times. The government itself almost admits as much when in the words of the Director of the Central Community Relations Unit, it is stated that 'The aim of the government is the removal of unnecessary obstacles to the wider use of the language'. A policy based merely on the 'removal of obstacles' can hardly be described as very pro-active.

The argument, also made by the Director of CCRU, that lower levels of support for Irish are justified because the language 'has the potential to be politically divisive' and that it lacks a 'geographical heartland' are not worthy as the basis for government policy.

As a rich repository of a centuries old culture, the Irish language cannot be said to have, in itself, any 'potential to be politically divisive'. Historically it was rendered divisive by those who outlawed and tried to suppress its use while, more recently, those who attempted to turn the language into a political weapon received but little general support from the Irish speaking community. As to the question of a geographical heartland, while it is true that a distinct geographical location is usually associated with a language, this is not always the case. It is no longer the case for Irish in the rest of Ireland, nor is it strictly the case either for Welsh and Ghaidhlig. For such languages their heartland lies with those communities, however close or scattered, who use and value them.

What is required, therefore, to ensure that Irish never again becomes a matter of narrow political contention is not a meek and hesitant approach to policy making, but rather one which openly acknowledges and supports Irish as an important element in the cultural life of the whole of society in Northern Ireland.



**The SDLP recommends that:-**

1. the government becomes a signatory to the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages without further delay;
2. a Commitment is made by the Secretary of State or Minister recognising the inadequate support for Irish language and culture in the past, and a commitment to pursue a more proactive policy with regard to the development of the language in future;
3. an Amendment of the Education Act to provide a statutory basis for the Gaelscoieanna system;
4. within the school system, steps be taken immediately to devise official criteria for recognition and support more appropriate to the needs of the Irish medium education to enable schools to be established in conditions, and with the necessary personnel and resources, to provide education in keeping with the modern demands and on a basis equal to those attending English medium schools;
5. at teacher training and in third level education generally, the needs of Irish be reviewed to ensure that an adequate supply of qualified teachers for Irish medium schools is provided. In this respect, opportunities for co-operation with the authorities and third level institutions in the South should be examined;
6. to monitor developments in Irish medium education, and with respect to the teaching of Irish generally, a special unit be established within the Department of Education;
7. the production of radio and television Irish medium programmes be encouraged and supported. In this respect, co-operation between programme makers North and South should be extended. This is particularly important given the existence of an Irish medium television channel in the South, Telefís na Gaeilge, which also makes it essential that the question of the reception of television signals on an all-Ireland basis be resolved as a matter of urgency;
8. within the arts, support for Irish medium initiatives of an individual, group and community basis to be enhanced; North-South co-operation and no-operation with other Celtic speaking communities, especially in Scotland, to be intensified with appropriate financial backing;
9. within the public sector, measures be taken to ensure that business through the medium of Irish is recognised as a civil right, and that gradually the means of doing that be made available by identifying from within the service, persons with a knowledge of Irish able and willing to conduct business in Irish;
10. within the economic sector, opportunities for using Irish be identified and developed;



11. the role of Iontaobhas Uladh be enhanced with increased resources to enable it to raise its public profile and to contribute more effectively to the promotion of Irish across the whole community.