

Dialect 2000 Conference

*Institutional Infrastructure Post-Good Friday Agreement:
The New Institutions and Devolved Government*

Queen's University

Belfast

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It is my pleasure personally and as a Minister in the Executive, to attend and contribute to today's session of this conference. Personally I am very pleased because my master's degree is in linguistics. As a result and also working in teacher education at the University of Ulster, I have taken a keen interest in aspects of the debate about language issues in Northern Ireland over the past three decades. As a member of the new Executive which has as a fundamental aim consolidating the peace process by, amongst other things, promoting mutual understanding between our different cultural traditions, I am pleased to participate in a conference debating issues very relevant to the achievement of that aim.

Indeed, this conference must be one of the most wide ranging in scope and in importance on the whole question of language and society ever held in Northern Ireland.

In my presentation I want to concentrate on the principles and parameters within which the new political institutions are required to operate, and then to mention some of the practical measures already being undertaken with respect to those principles and parameters.

I have to stress, however, that while the Executive took office last December the lengthy period of suspension from February to the end of May, meant that progress in developing policies and programmes within the context of the principles and parameters which I will outline has been seriously delayed. It is only now that the process of formulating a programme for government within which policies will be elaborated and programmes developed is proceeding. It is a process that will not be completed until the close of the year.

I must also stress that since I am not the Minister directly responsible for cultural and linguistic matters and since, as I have already stated at the outset, policy and programmes directly attributable to the new Executive are only beginning to be formulated, I am somewhat constrained in what I have to say about what will be done.

The manifesto, if I can refer to it in that sense, under which the Executive has taken office, is the GFA. That agreement sets out the principles to which I have just referred. Primarily those principles impose commitments to developing “partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis to relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between these islands.”

Applied to the issues of concern to this conference these commitments require a recognition of the “...the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various linguistic minorities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.”

This obligation to recognise, respect, understand and tolerate our linguistic diversity, is a major challenge. Indeed in light of the ‘health warning’ issued last evening by Manfred Gurlach the challenge is one surrounded by many sensitivities and possible dangers.

It is a challenge to those who would try to deny that such diversity exists, to those who would grudgingly admit that such diversity is limited to only two languages English and the second, Irish, being just about worthy

of acknowledgement. It is a challenge to those who would celebrate Irish as the only other language worthy of recognition alongside English. It is a challenge to those who would talk disparagingly about Ulster-Scots, whether as a language or a variety of another language. It is a challenge to the Ulster-Scots community itself which might not be all as welcoming of the kind of attention some are giving to their culture at the present time. It is a challenge to those who would not have acknowledged any need to take account of the languages of communities hitherto not indigenous to our shores.

In summary terms, the challenge is to acknowledge that Northern Irish society is a more linguistically diverse society than many would previously have been prepared to accept. Secondly, the challenge is to move from that acknowledgement and acceptance to making public space for and allowing resources to be devoted to practical measures which will enable public recognition and expression to be given to our linguistic diversity and to the cultural diversity of which that linguistic diversity is a part. All that at the same time as we are engaged in a process of creating and developing closer links between the people who espouse the traditions that make up this diversity.

The task facing the Executive, therefore, in light both of the GFA and of the soon to be ratified Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, is to develop policies, programmes and support mechanisms which will promote that public recognition and expression.

In addressing the issues related to linguistic and cultural diversity identified in the GFA, the Executive is, of course, not starting with a

blank sheet, nor is it addressing a uniform situation with respect to the language situation.

With respect to the latter we have a situation of considerable linguistic imbalance. English is our dominant language and the first language of an extremely high proportion of those born here. Where it is not the first language it is probably soon acquired - out of necessity, if for no other reason.

Irish is the second language with at least 140,000 persons indicating some knowledge of it, passive or active. The use of Irish as a public medium is most regular within the educational sphere in the growing number of Irish medium schools, at second and primary levels as well as nursery/pre-school level. Business, commercial and administrative uses of Irish are developing but are not at all extensive. A limited range of Irish medium programmes are being produced for local radio and television. Irish is seldom heard on the streets except in a limited number of areas and by a small number of people.

Nevertheless there is a vibrant Irish language community in Northern Ireland with links to the wider Irish language community in the rest of Ireland and now extending those links especially to the Scots-Gaelic communities and to other communities within the Celtic family.

Ulster-Scots is much less researched as to the number of speakers and its use, while public awareness of it is clouded in ignorance and, for some people, in considerable prejudice as well.

Also within our society there are those of the non-indigenous communities using, as their first language, languages of China and of the Indian sub-continent. Furthermore, if, as the South has begun to experience in recent years we were to experience the arrival of other non-indigenous people we could see that list rapidly expand.

As far as the situation prior to the GFA is concerned, developments were already under way on several fronts, primarily addressing the needs of the Irish language community and, if funding is a measure of what was happening, doing so mostly with respect to Irish medium schooling.

But, as already indicated, the GFA has given a new impetus, a new dynamic and new responsibilities to the whole issue of language diversity. The new institutions established under the GFA reflect some of that change.

Perhaps the most important initiative taken since the GFA was the establishment of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as the lead department for language policy as set down in the agreement. The Linguistic Diversity Branch of that Department is the unit of the administration most closely involved in the elaboration of general language policy.

In terms of policy and programmes the Department of Education has a special remit for Irish medium education at pre-school, primary and secondary levels.

My own Department, the Department for Higher, Further Education, Training and Employment, has a more indirect supportive role given that,

unlike the DE, it does not have direct responsibility for curricula either at university or further education levels, or indeed within training programmes. Research is supported by my Department through the general funding arrangements for universities, not directly to specific projects.

Within the Office of the F/DFM lie responsibilities for human rights, equality and community relations, each of which touches on aspects of culture and language as set out in the GFA.

With respect to the European Charter, a Steering and Working Group have been set up to decide how it should be implemented for Northern Ireland and, specifically, which provisions of Part 111 of the Charter apply to Irish. This part of the Charter outlines ‘Measures to promote the use of regional or minority languages in public life...’ The Groups are widely representative of the departments of the devolved government and also include the NIO and the Courts Service. The work is being taken forward by the Linguistic Diversity Branch of the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure assisted by a consultant to the Council of Europe.

Other initiatives prompted by the GFA are those relating to extending reception of the South’s TG4 channel to Northern Ireland about which technical discussions are ongoing.

A two-year Irish language TV and film production pilot scheme will start by April 2001. Officials of my own Department are in discussion about the kind of training support which the various technicians involved in Irish language film production may require.

Irish medium education, especially at pre-school, primary and secondary levels, is one of the issues within the whole context of linguistic policy arising from the GFA to receive attention.

Currently the DE funds 8 Irish medium schools (7 primary and 1 secondary) with approximately 1,500 pupils. There are also 2 grant-aided Irish medium units located within English medium schools with a further 2 to be grant-aided from next month. Approximately 300 pre-school places are currently being assisted with funding from the DE.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaiochta (The Council for Irish Medium Schools) is being established to advise on policy and oversee its implementation in this area. Among the issues which it will address are the viability criteria for new Irish-medium schools. This is an issue with considerable potential for controversy and one which requires a balance to be struck between factors such as the capacity to provide for the whole curriculum, the cost of separate facilities, the cost of staff, and most important of all the capacity to ensure the overall educational and social development of the pupils attending Irish medium schools. As one who received almost all of my own primary and second level education through the medium of Irish I need no convincing of its positive value.

Initiatives with respect to Ulster-Scots include financial support for the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council to employ an Education Officer together with agreement in principle to provide resources to support strategic development work. Academic research has been commissioned by the Research Branch of the OFM/DFM to establish a sound knowledge on the geographical distribution of Ulster-Scots and on public attitudes and perceptions.

With respect other ethnic groups a Working Party on the Position of Minority Ethnic People will identify unmet needs and other factors which can cause minority ethnic people to be at risk of social exclusion and provide recommendations for cross-departmental policy and strategy. Language is not specifically mentioned, though it is likely to be raised as an issue if social exclusion is to be effectively addressed. However, I accept that merely viewing such languages as these groups use in the context of social exclusion may well be seen as a very narrow perspective. Such a perspective says nothing about fostering, celebrating or promoting such languages and these are legitimate expectations in the light of the GFA agreement. Other initiatives are, therefore, likely to be necessary to achieve a more comprehensive approach to minority ethnic cultures and their languages.

Perhaps the most headline setting initiative under the GFA has been the establishment of the North/South Language Implementation Body with its two linked agencies, Foras na Gaeilge (Irish Language Agency) and the Ulster-Scots Agency. This Body will be in the forefront of many initiatives, complementing those taken by our own new Northern Irish administration and extending its range of activity across the whole of the island. Building on decades of experience of Irish language development and promotion a great deal is expected of it.

To date one Ministerial meeting of the Body has taken place. At board and official level a great deal of preparatory work is underway. The Body has a budget of just under £8m this year made up of contributions from both administrations.

In terms of wider relationships between the people of these islands, the British-Irish Council offers possibilities for supporting initiatives within the whole area of cultural and linguistic relationships. The likely agenda here has not even been addressed but may well be when the second meeting of the Council takes place in September.

In concluding I want to stress the importance for the whole GFA project of the obligations to promote understanding and respect for our cultural diversity and within it for the linguistic diversity we possess in this society. That diversity, in addition to being understood and respected, should be celebrated as a great and positive part of our heritage. For too long we have not all wanted to see our heritage in its rich complexity. In its mosaic of Irish, Scots, English, Celtic, Norman and Anglo-Saxon traditions, with traces of Nordic, French Huguenot and perhaps many others, combining now with wider European and North American and even Asian influences, all daily transforming us.

Let us use our talents within this new dispensation to acknowledge and celebrate the best of the past so that in all its positive respects it can be part of the reforming and transforming process that we have to go through if we are to live in a society, as the GFA says, imbued with a spirit of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust.