

# 20 Month Strategy for the Irish Language

## Part Two: Grow or Die – Understanding the Irish Language Revival Today

The Philo-Celtic Society  
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*Offensive operations ... are the surest, if not the only means of defence.*  
– George Washington, 1799

*Grow or die.* – George Land, 1973

### SUMMARY

As you will see below:

- Some of the best experts in the field say that "the Irish Language has only between 15 and 20 years left as the language of home and community in the strongest parts of the Gaeltacht." Therefore, people who support the Irish Language and its community must act now, not over the next 20 years, to revive the language.
- The revival of Irish is a human and civil rights movement.
- More than 93% in the Republic are in favor of the revival of the Irish Language in the Gaeltachtaí in full and in the domains of art and culture

throughout the state. More than 40% are in favor of the revival of Irish in every public domain and in every locality throughout the state.

- Less than 7% are against the revival of Irish.
- The Irish Language movement stands with support from the overwhelming majority of the people.
- Based solely on defence, the original Gaeltacht strategy was doomed to failure from the beginning. Grow or die.

## **BACKGROUND**

As we saw in Part 1, in contrast to the American opinion that English law put an end to the speaking of Irish in most of Ireland, the people of Ireland themselves voluntarily abandoned the Irish Language. They chose to speak English primarily for economic reasons. Jobs and security for their children were to be found through English.

Of course, the people of Ireland can make another choice if they want. And we can learn the most effective strategies from successful examples like the revival of Norwegian in the 19th century after more than 300 years without it being spoken, and the revival of Hebrew in the 20th century after more than 2000 years without it being spoken, and the revivals which are going on now in various countries like Wales, Catalonia, Lithuania, the Basque country, and plenty of other places.

But Ireland herself is the best paradigm for Ireland. It's not long ago that the language switched from Irish to English. We know precisely how that happened, and we can see it happening still. Why then, therefore, can't the people of Ireland use the same forces and democratic methods to strengthen the Irish Language and its people?

Certainly they can. Therefore, we recommend:

## **START WITH UNDERSTANDING**

1. Although it is a fine and important thing that the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language now exists and that the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

has taken the first steps according to that long-term Strategy, it is not right or fair to ask the Irish-speaking people to wait another year, or two, or twenty for their human and civil rights, rights which should have been theirs and in effect since the founding of the State.

This is the first reason that we are recommending immediate action. Now, this year, not at some other time in the future.

2. The Gaeltacht communities which are left and the Irish-speaking people outside the Gaeltachtaí do not have any more time to wait. In its “Explanatory and Financial Memorandum”, the Irish Government reported that the Gaeltacht Act of 2012 is based on the recommendations found in the Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Usage of Irish in the Gaeltacht (2007) in which it is demonstrated that “a significant shift from Irish to English has taken place in the Gaeltacht” (1) and:

*“The unambiguous conclusion of the survey on young people is that, without a major change to language-use patterns, Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language in those areas with the most widespread and inclusive Irish-speaking networks (i.e. Category A Gaeltacht districts) for more than another fifteen to twenty years. By the time the young people surveyed for this study become parents, the networks of active speakers will not be widespread enough to reproduce another generation of Irish speakers unless a supportive sociolinguistic environment can be established in the interim.” (2)*

That is the second reason that we are recommending immediate action.

3. Understand that the revival of Irish is a human and civil rights movement.

Freedom of Speech is the right to say anything you want in your own language. It is not the right to say what someone else wants in that person’s language.

People have the right to speak Irish in Ireland and they are practicing that right despite obstacles placed in their way.

4. Understand that the revival of Irish is a very large movement which is growing in strength.

a. In 1975, approximately 65% of adults in the Republic said “that it is right to ensure the future of the language and to give public support to the language.” (3)

These days, as we see in in the study *The Irish Language and the Irish People* done by Micheál Mac Gréil and Fergal Rhatigan at NUI Maynooth in 2007-2008 (4) and in the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language:

(translated from Irish) “The results show overwhelming support for preservation of Irish: 52.5% say that Irish should be preserved in the Gaeltacht and that outside the Gaeltacht its revival should be accomplished by its use in the arts and in culture, while 40.9% (more) say that the language should be revived for public purposes throughout the State.” (5)

In other words, more than 93% in the Republic are in favor of the revival of the Irish Language in the Gaeltachtaí in full and in the domains of art and culture throughout the state. More than 40% are in favor of the revival of Irish in the arts, in culture, and in every public domain and in every locality throughout the state.

b. In 1975, 20-25% of adults in the Republic were “actively and steadfastly” against the language. (6)

I 2007 / 2008: “Those who wished to see Irish ‘discarded and forgotten’ amounted to 7%. Given the relentless expression of negative attitudes in much of the popular mass media, the consistency and strength of positive attitudes and the paucity of numbers of those who would wish to see the end of Irish, are truly remarkable.” (7)

c. In 1975, only 23% of the population outside the Gaeltacht was able to carry on a conversation even partially in Irish. Increased by Gaeilgeoirí in the Gaeltacht, conversational ability at some level was possessed by about 25% of the Irish people. (8)

In 2006, 1.6 milliún (41% of the people of the Republic of Ireland) said that they were able to speak Irish at some level. (2006 census) In 2002, about 339,000 (8%) in the Republic said they were fluent. (9)

d. (translated from Irish) “184,898 people in the six counties of the north have some ability in Irish, according to preliminary results of the 2011 Census. That’s

the same as 10.65% of the population and it is an increase from 167,490 people in 2001 .... 4,164 people above the age of 3 answered that Irish was their primary language ...” (10)

In 2002 in the six counties of the north, 75,125 (4.5%) out of 1,685,267 claimed that they were more or less completely fluent in Irish. (11)

e. In 2001, before the Department of Education and Skills succeeded in “voluntarily” liquidating the Linguistic Institute of Ireland (ITÉ) by withdrawing their funding, (12) (13) the ITÉ did independent, comprehensive research which demonstrated that many parents in the Republic would like to place their children in Gaelscoileanna. Gaelscoileanna Teoranta provided this summary in 2011:

“In research by the ITÉ 30% of parents showed that they would choose Gaelscoil education if it were available to them at primary level and 25% that they would choose Gaelscoil education if it were available to them at post primary level in their area.” (14)

There is every indication that the demand for Gaelscoileanna has strengthened since 2001.

f. As you can see, the Irish Language movement is not some tiny radical fringe. If the citizens who are raising their voices for their own rights and for the rights of other Irish-speaking people can be called a “lobby”, understand that this “lobby” stands with support from the overwhelming majority of the people.

5. Understand that the language is overwhelmingly important for the future of Ireland.

a. The largest and oldest tradition of law, history, and genealogy in Europe. The second most ancient genealogical tradition on the planet, only the genealogies of China are older. One of the most ancient and most wonderful storytelling traditions in the world. A window on the Iron Age. The oldest literary language in Europe which is still spoken. One of the most ancient and wonderful poetic traditions in the world. A jewel in the literature of the world with great respect around the world.

b. Not enough? Looking backward, not forward? All right, think about this.

Wales still survives as a nation, and Catalonia, and the Basque Country, and many other nations even though they are under the control of other, larger countries, and people throughout the world have understanding and respect that they are still nations because they still have their own languages.

What happens when a language dies? As a single example, two or three hundred years ago it was understood that Cornwall was a distinct nation although it was under the control of England. Today, it's just an English county in which most of the people believe they're English and that their ancestors were always English.

Ireland no longer has national borders (i.e., "Europe without internal borders"); Ireland no longer has legal sovereignty; Ireland no longer has the punt; Ireland no longer has economic sovereignty. Cornwall has a flag as does every other European or English county. A flag is not enough.

6. We can ask: "What about the English literature of Ireland, and the wonderful music and dance of Ireland? Wouldn't they do the job as characteristics, symbols, or traits of identity by which to demand and keep Ireland's nationhood in the future?" Well, think about these facts.

No people ever won or kept recognition as a nation by means of their music and dance. As for literature, it was no secret that people were coming together in societies like The Ossianic Society (1853), Cumann Carad na Gaeilge / The Philo-Celtic Society (which began with classes in Brooklyn, New York, in 1872), and Conradh na Gaeilge (1893) to promote the Irish Language and its literature. However, at the same time, another group wrote only in English, although they had Irish, and they worked to put Ireland on the road to Cornwall. They succeeded greatly. Maybe that's the reason that most of the world still (or already) thinks that Ireland belongs to England and that the Irish are British.

In other words, except for the language, no other characteristic, symbol or trait exists which is both effective and remaining to prove the national identity of Ireland and to demand the nationhood of Ireland in the future.

Choose.

200 years from now, will Ireland be just another European or English county like Cornwall, or will Ireland still be a nation?

7. We often hear or read statements like this: “We don’t need a distinct language. Countries like the U.S. and Australia don’t have a distinct language.”

Apples and oranges. The United States, for example, developed on the other side of the world without effective control from England in almost every domain, although England wanted the opposite. Today in the U.S., we don’t often hear about England or the United Kingdom. Say “Manchester” and we think you’re talking about a city in New Hampshire. Say “Birmingham” and we think you’re talking about a city in Alabama. The United Kingdom has no significant influence on our policies, our media, or on our worldview. Since 1169 and especially since the 1580s down to today, that’s not the case for Ireland.

8. Understand that Irish law is now on the side of the Irish speaker.

At last, under the Official Languages Act of 2003, it is possible for Irish speakers to demand and get their human and civil rights.

9. Understand that the revival can’t advance without a good economic foundation.

Exactly as happened in the 19th century, people will move to another language if they can make a good living through it for themselves and their children. If people can’t make a living through Irish, the decline of the Irish Language will continue until its death.

10. Understand that the language needs status.

English received respect, honor and status by its usage throughout the government, throughout the churches, at the top of the economic sector, and throughout the new educational system since the 17th century and especially since the 19th century. In places and domains where the Irish Language was not respected, people were ashamed to speak it. This is still a common problem.

How can a language gain status?

Exactly as we saw in Ireland from the 17th century until today, if a language is used for the most important purposes in every domain, it is an extremely important language. If it's not used for important purposes, it is not an important language.

The decision is clear. Use it, not one week a year (although Irish Language Week is a great development), but the whole year at the top of the government, at the top of every church, at the top of the economic sector, at the top of every company, at the top of every foundation and other organization, and throughout the educational system from top to bottom.

And no method or resource bestows status as effectively as lots of jobs done through Irish at every level in every domain in every locality.

11. Understand that the language is not found only in the Gaeltachtaí.

Everyone knows Irish speakers have been moving in large numbers from the Gaeltacht to cities and large towns in Ireland and overseas to get jobs for more than 160 years.

In 2002 in the Republic, approximately 62,000 Irish speakers were still left in the official Gaeltachtaí and about 340,000 more or less fluent Irish speakers in the Republic outside the Gaeltachtaí claiming daily usage of the language. (15) In addition, other Irish speakers live around the world, between 18,000 and 25,000 in the U.S. alone. (2000 Census: 25,661. 2005 Census: 18,815) As the number of Irish speakers in the Gaeltachtaí has been decreasing, the number of Irish speakers outside the Gaeltachtaí has been increasing.

'The best defense is a good offense.' It's apparent that the 'Gaeltacht Strategy' didn't do the job. Begun in 1926, that strategy was and is primarily based on defense alone. Therefore, from the beginning, that strategy yielded advantage, speakers, and ground to English. No language can stay as it is, without weakening, without changing, while its adversary or competitor is banging on the gates and pushing in every day every night year after year.

It's necessary to make a choice. Grow or die. There's no other choice. To grow, Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht (English-speaking area) in Ireland and around the world have to link together in virtual Gaeltachts (as is happening through the internet now), and as urban Gaeltachts (as has happened in Belfast already by the will of the people themselves), and with the official Gaeltachts. It's apparent that

the authors of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language understand this, but this growth has to be accomplished immediately, like almost every other recommendation in the Strategy.

## **LISTEN TO THE COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE LANGUAGE AND GIVE A GOOD ANSWER.**

12. It is extremely often that we read in Irish newspapers or on the internet complaints from many Irish like this: “I can’t speak a word of it after 14 years studying it in school. That language is without use, function, or benefit. Any time spent learning Irish is time wasted.” Although we don’t like this statement, there’s a good amount of truth in it.

People around the world are amazed, even disbelieving, that the Education Department still doesn’t know how to teach Irish 91 years after the founding of the State. Students around the world are fluent after studying any language for only 6 years. Certainly, if students can’t speak Irish after 14 years, or can’t speak any language after 14 years, the Education Department has wasted the time of these students, no matter what language they were learning.

If a person can’t use a tool, including a communication tool like a language, certainly that tool is useless for that person. For many people, Chinese is useless, without function or benefit for the single reason that they don’t speak it. But Chinese is very useful for 1.3 billion other people. You have to be able to speak a language before you can use it.

Is Irish useless, without function or benefit even for many Irish speakers? That’s the problem, isn’t it? As we have seen since the 17th century, and especially since the 19th century, if people can’t make a living for themselves and for their children through Irish, they have to abandon the language. James Carville said in 1991, “It’s the economy, stupid.” We can rephrase this with regard to Irish as: “It’s the lack of jobs done through the medium of Irish, a chara.”

13. It’s often that we hear or see in print statements like this:

“I don’t want to speak Irish because that militant group speaks it.”

Well, in contrast to the statement we discussed in paragraph 11 above, this one is just ridiculous. Did George Washington refuse to speak English because George III spoke English? Did the Italians abandon Italian because Mussolini spoke it? Did the Chinese abandon Chinese because the emperors spoke it? Certainly they did not. Imagine that you don't like someone, and that person wants your land, which your ancestors gave to you. Do you give it to him and go away without a word?

14. It's often that we hear or see in print statements like this:

"It's not democratic that we have to learn Irish in school. Is it right that we are compelled to learn Irish?"

Certainly this is a complicated question. But (translated from Irish) "65% of people (aged 15-27) say that Irish should be compulsory for the Ardteist. [Ipsos MRBI 2010]" (16) In a democracy, it's often we have to accept the decision of the majority, even though we don't like it.

And in any other country in which there are two official languages, does any democratic government say that a citizen doesn't have to learn how to speak with the people of the other language? What would that do to the future of that country?

Or, in any other country in which there are two official languages, does any democratic government say that the minority has to be responsible for communicating with the majority, and the majority doesn't have to be responsible for communicating with the minority? Would that be democracy, or discrimination?

15. From time to time we hear or see in print statements like this:

"I'm Irish, I don't want to speak Irish, and I refuse to speak Irish."

Certainly people have the right not to speak Irish, and certainly it's right to respect that stance without hindrance, criticism, insult, or ridicule. But if you're one of those people, and if you want respect for your stance, remember that it's night right to hinder, criticize, insult, or ridicule those who want to get schooling for their children through Irish, services in Irish from government-owned companies and

semi-state bodies and government departments, jobs providing those services through Irish, or who want to provide services through Irish in their own companies, or who want to get jobs providing those services in private companies, or who want to speak Irish every day everywhere at every level in government, in business, in education, and in every other domain throughout the country.

## **FOLLOW-UP WITH ACTION**

We'll discuss this in Part 3 of this article.

## **TAGAIRTÍ**

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