

Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium:
 The Politics of the Irish
 Language Under the English
 and British Governments

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There is a strong connection between the Irish Gaelic language revival and politics.¹ In the nineteenth century, Douglas Hyde, leader of the Gaelic League (*Conradh na Gaeilge*), portrayed Gaelic as the *sine qua non* of Irish national identity. Hyde argued that Ireland's native language represented its strongest and perhaps sole legitimate claim to nationhood. Berating the Irish for abandoning the language, he wrote:

I wish to show you that in Anglicising ourselves wholesale we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality. What did Mazzini say? What is Goldwin Smith never tired of declaiming? What do the *Spectator* and *Saturday Review* harp on? That we ought to be content as an integral part of the United Kingdom because we have lost the robes of nationality, our language and customs. It has

¹ It's a great honor to speak at Glucksman Ireland House at the Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium. I read Barra's wonderful articles in the *Irish Echo*, and I learned with him in Esopus, New York, with *Daltaí na Gaeilge*. He was a gentleman. And I am thankful to Pádraig Ó Cearúill, my teacher at New York University for six years now.

always been very curious to me how Irish sentiment sticks in this halfway house — how it continues to apparently hate the English, and the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so.²

The centrality that Hyde accords to the language in Irish claims to nationhood is typical of the rhetoric of turn of the century cultural nationalism. It's also interesting that those opposed to Irish autonomy and claims to nationhood posit the weakened state of the language as central to their delegitimizing claims. Clearly Gaelic, though demographically and even culturally peripheral at this point in time, was symbolically central in debates over the political future of Ireland.

In the north of Ireland during and since “The Troubles,” there has been a strong connection between republicans and the Gaelic revival. We're familiar with the joke, from the time when there were many republicans in prison: “Maybe Gaelic will die in the *Gaeltacht*, but it will survive in the *gaoltacht*.” (“*Gaol*” is the Irish-English spelling for “jail.”) Sinn Féin activist Pádraig Ó Maolcraoibhe explains that for republican prisoners “stripped of everything” — including their clothes during the push for political prisoner status — “they realized that the most Irish thing they had was their Irish language. Learning it, speaking it all day, was a way of resisting, of asserting your identity.”³ Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams argued “that the restoration of our culture must be a crucial part of our struggle and that the restoration of the Irish language must be a central part of the cultural struggle,” echoing the view of republican activist and Trinity College Professor Máirtín Ó Cadhain that “the reconquest of Ireland will begin with the reconquest of the Irish language.”⁴

The Gaelic revival is centered in republican areas of the north.

² Douglas Hyde, 1894, quoted in Aodan Mac Poilin, “Plus Ça Change: The Irish Language and Politics,” *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland*, ed. Aodan Mac Poilin (Belfast: Ultach Trust, 1997), 35–36.

³ Pádraig Ó Maolcraoibhe, *The Role of Language in Ireland's Cultural Revival* (Belfast: Sinn Féin, 1984), 9, cited in Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1366–1922: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

⁴ Gerry Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon Books, 1987), 143–144, cited in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 7.

Drive around west and north Belfast and you will see several murals depicting literary and mythic figures with inscriptions in Gaelic. One mural in Ardoyne depicts a teacher and students at a hedge school — the illegal schools held in the fields to circumvent the Penal Laws banning education for Catholics — with the inscription “*Labhair an teanga Gaeilge liom,*” or “Speak the Gaelic language with me.” Gaelic language street names placed there by residents often demarcate nationalist, mostly Catholic neighborhoods. Until recently, soldiers, police and/or unionists would paint-bomb these signs. A republican slogan is “*Tiocfaidh ar lá*” — “Our day will come.” Gaelic has long been associated with republican, or at least nationalist, politics.⁵ Many decry the politicization of Gaelic, particularly by republican leaders. One Protestant learner said,

Every time [Gerry Adams] opens his mouth he puts a nail in the coffin of the language for the Prods. I know a guy... who’s really interested in Irish, and the other day Gerry Adams said something in Irish and he says, “That’s it.” He’s finished... they’re using the Irish language, they’re *abusing* it... It’s used in the jails! All the political prisoners in the jails have Irish. They’re taking it and making it their own.⁶

The political experiences of Gaelic are often pushed into the background due to a desire to encourage as many as possible, including Protestants (some of whom are nationalists) and unionists, to learn the language. With just a few tens of thousands of native speakers left in the world — many living in Britain or the U.S. due

⁵ In general, republicans are Irish people who are willing to take up arms to liberate Ireland from British rule, while nationalists support achieving British withdrawal and reunification of the country through nonviolent means. However, some republicans are pacifists and oppose violence. Similarly, unionists are usually those supporting British rule in Northern Ireland who oppose paramilitary violence, while loyalists are supporters of union with Britain who are often willing to use violence not only against republicans, but also against Catholics in general. Again, this distinction can get blurred, as some mainstream unionists have no problem with unjustified state violence against nonviolent nationalist protesters, and make statements that incite and justify loyalist violence.

⁶ Gordon McCoy, “Protestant Learners of Irish in Northern Ireland,” in *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland*, ed. Aodan Mac Poilin (Belfast: Ultach Trust, 1997), 161.

to the lack of jobs in their economically peripheral home regions — those seeking a revival of Gaelic attempt to construct as broad a tent as possible. It is also important to view Irish Gaelic as the heritage of all people in Ireland, and to acknowledge, as Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, the central role Protestants played in the preservation and study of Gaelic from the late eighteenth through early twentieth centuries.⁷

While proponents of Gaelic should encourage its learning by Unionists and Protestants, full depoliticization is amnesic and ahistorical. It’s important to acknowledge the role of British policy toward Irish Gaelic in order to understand the role of language in the formation of Irish identity, as well as to articulate affirmative proposals that the British government should take to reverse the cumulative damage its policies have caused. As one Belfast human rights group notes,

There has been great play made of the fact that the language has been politicized by nationalists. This thesis, however, refuses to acknowledge that it was the experience of invasion which first politicised the language when its eradication was seen as a political objective by the colonizers.⁸

For more than six centuries, British policy in Ireland has aimed at the destruction of the Irish Gaelic language.⁹ British repression of Gaelic continued into the contemporary period, where “until recently, the practice of the British State in Northern Ireland towards the use of the Irish language was at best simply negative and at worst actively hostile.”¹⁰ By and large, from 1366 through the late nineteenth century British colonial rulers “argued precisely for the extermination of

⁷ Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, *Hidden Ulster: Protestants and the Irish Language* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995)

⁸ Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann: The UK Government’s approach to the Irish language in light of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Belfast: Committee on the Administration of Justice, 1993), 7.

⁹ Irish Gaelic is a Celtic language closely related to Scots Gaelic and Manx Gaelic. The word for the language in Irish Gaelic is “Gaeilge.” In Ireland today most refer to the language as “Irish,” while students in the U.S. use both “Irish” and “Gaelic” interchangeably. In this paper for, the sake of clarity, I will refer to the language as “Gaelic.”

¹⁰ Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 9.

the Irish language as part of a larger political project.”¹¹ Today I will speak about the politics of English and British laws toward Irish Gaelic from the fourteenth century up until the present.

Not all English and British policies have been uniformly anti-Gaelic. British and British-identified Protestant missionaries in the Irish Bible Society printed the Old and New Testaments in Gaelic. Queen Elizabeth I allegedly expressed an interest in learning Gaelic during the plantation of Munster Province (Cuige Mumhan) and was presented a primer to aid her education.¹² But these were exceptions to the rule. During the twentieth century the British state in Northern Ireland wavered between outright repression in times of armed conflict (the Troubles of 1969 to the late 1990s) and malign neglect in times when conflict was largely suppressed (the 1920s through the late 1960s).

Politicization and Depoliticization: Gaelic as a Sign of Disloyalty

The Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 commanded that “if any English, or Irish living among the English, use the Irish language amongst themselves, contrary to this ordinance, and thereof be attainted, his lands and tenements, if he have any, shall be seized into the hands of his immediate lord...” This ban on the Irish language was accompanied by an anti-miscegenation law.¹³ A later law required Irishmen to take on English surnames or forfeit property.¹⁴

A 1536 missive from Henry VIII to the colonial rulers of the port city of Galway ordered that “every inhabitant within said town endeavor themselves to speak English” and teach it to their children. Galwegians were warned to “fail not to fulfil this, our commandment, as you tender our favor, and would avoid our indignation and high displeasure.”¹⁵ A British statute issued

¹¹ Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 2.

¹² Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 2.

¹³ Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 15.

¹⁴ *1465 Statute*, excerpted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 16.

¹⁵ *S.P. Hen.VIII*. Henry VIII to the Town of Galway, 1536, excerpted in Crowley,

the following year blamed the Irish people’s attachment to Gaelic as the main cause of their “certain savage and wild kind and manner of living.” This statute implied that it was attachment to Gaelic language and traditional Irish styles of dress which made the Irish people consider themselves part of a separate country from the English colonists, when in fact they were all British.¹⁶

For five centuries a constant of British discourse on Gaelic has been the claim that speaking in Gaelic is a sign of disloyalty, and that loyal subjects should only speak English. The 1537 act portrayed the exclusive use of English as the only choice for “His Highness’s true and faithful subjects.” Gaelic speakers were by definition disloyal by virtue of their use of the Gaelic tongue: “whosoever shall... not... use... the English tongue, his Majestic will reporte them in his most noble heart as persons that esteeme not his most dread lawes and commandements...”¹⁷ Parents were ordered to speak only English with their children, and to not let them be around Gaelic speakers. This was the not the first statute to imply that Gaelic speakers were a source of infection. Later statutes would be more explicit in this claim.

Irish Gaelic as Contagion, English as Purity

Another constant theme of English and British constructions of Gaelic is that it is a contagion that infects the English or Irish children who should become more like the English. This dates back at least to the 1366 Statute of Kilkenny, which expressed alarm that most descendents of Anglo-Norman settlers had been assimilated into the Gaelic-speaking majority. Two centuries later Speaker of the English Parliament James Stanihurst called for a “reformation” of habits among the Irish, “to breed in the rudest of our people, resolute English hearts.” He made explicit the claim that English purity was threatened with infection by Gaelic speakers:

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¹⁶ *Stat. Ire.* An Act for the English Order, Habit and Language, 1537, reprinted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 21.

¹⁷ 28 Henry VIII c. 15, cited in Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 39.

Babes from their Cradles should be inured under learned School-masters, with a pure English tongue, habit, fashion, discipline; and in time utterly forget the affinity of their unbroken borderers, who possibly might be won by this example, or at least wise lose the opportunity, which now they have, to infect others.¹⁸

A sixteenth century history of the English settlement of Ireland credited the colonization of the English “pale” around Dublin with the “supplant[ing]” of “rudeness” and “rebellion” with “civility” and “loyalty.” However, the author warned that the Irish weed had encroached back into the English garden. As noted, unlike the Anglo-Norman conquerors, their descendents were less vigilant against the encroachment of Gaelic, and most “Old English” by this time spoke Gaelic as their native and daily language:

[T]he Irish language was free denized in the English pale: this canker took such deep root, as the body that before was whole and sound, was by little and little festered, and in manner wholly putrified.¹⁹

Attacks on the People, Culture and Religion

Mass murder and other tactics of ethnic cleansing were tools used repeatedly by the English in Ireland at least through the seventeenth century. Describing the repression of the Desmond uprising of the 1580s against the English plantation of Munster, Sir William Pelham reported, “We consumed with fire all the

¹⁸ 1570 oration, excerpted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 28.

¹⁹ Gaelic was a “ringworm” bringing about “this present ruin and decay.” The Irish were “rude” and “blunt” people who “prattled” and “gagged” their own native language, with its borrowed “motheaten Latin word[s]” (Richard Stanihurst, 1577, excerpted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 31–37). Contagion metaphors were also used to describe Catholicism. One early-seventeenth-century pamphleteer wrote that “...the people are daily seduced, infected and perverted by Jesuites, Seminaries, and other runnagate Priests the ministers of Antichrist, wherewith the Country doth swarme...” (Rich, 1609, cited in Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, 54).

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habitations and executed the people wherever we found them.”²⁰ In the wake of the Munster campaign, Sir Henry Sidney wrote the King in 1585 explaining how Ireland might once and for all be conquered and pacified: “All brehons [judges], carraghes, bards, rhymers, friars, monks, Jesuits, pardoners, nuns, and such like, to be executed by martial law... Irish habits for men and women to be abolished, and the English tongue to be extended...”²¹

Following the Irish uprising against British settlement in 1641 British forces implemented a brutal attack that targeted the native Irish people as well as their distinctive religion and language. Following an eleven-year scorched earth war that involved the destruction of most food crops, the Physician-General of the English army estimated that 500,000 Irish, or about one third of the population, had been killed “by the sword, plague, famine, hardships and banishment.”²² English army commander Sir Charles Coote ordered his men to kill all Irish adults as well as children “more than a span long.” When some of his officers objected, Coote is said to have replied, “Kill the nits and you will have no lice.”²³ In 1653 the English Parliament ordered the transplantation of all Irish from Ulster, Leinster and Munster provinces to the most agriculturally barren province, Connacht, except for those who could prove loyalty to parliament over the king. Failure to comply by May 1, 1654 was punishable by death.²⁴ Between 50,000 and 100,000 Irish, many women and children, were sent as slaves and indentured servants to the Caribbean.²⁵

Physical attacks on the Irish people were accompanied by attacks on Catholicism and Gaelic; as Daniel Corkery reflected, “Irish did not die at the top. It was killed at the top when its institutions, practically one and all, were destroyed.”²⁶ The 1695 Act to Restrain Foreign Education banned “papists” from teaching or sending their children

²⁰ M. E. Collins, *Conquest and Colonisation* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969), 44.

²¹ Henry Sidney, 1585, excerpted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 38.

²² Peter Berresford Ellis, *Hell or Connaught! The Cromwellian Colonisation of Ireland 1652-1660* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1975), 9.

²³ Sean O’Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* (Dingle, Ireland: Brandon, 2001), 45; Ellis, *Hell or Connaught!*, 19–20.

²⁴ Ellis, *Hell or Connaught!*, 116–117.

²⁵ O’Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados*, 81–86; Ellis, *Hell or Connaught!*, 149–154.

²⁶ Daniel Corkery, *The Fortunes of the Irish Language* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1968).

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to the European continent to study, as some Irish had done in the seventeenth century. Irish Catholic-run schools were explicitly linked in the statute to the spreading of disloyalty and linguistic difference:

Whereas it is found by experience that tolerating and conniving at papists keeping schools or instructing youth in literature, is one reason of many of the natives of this kingdom continuing ignorant of the principles of true religion, and strangers to the scriptures, and of their neglecting to conform themselves to the laws and statutes of this realm, and of their not using the English habit and language, to the great prejudice of the public weal thereof... no person whatsoever of the popish religion shall publicly teach school, or instruct youth in learning, or in private houses teach or instruct youth in learning within this realm from henceforth...²⁷

This penal law led to the growth of illegal “hedge schools” throughout Ireland, where Irish youth were taught in all subjects, including Gaelic and often Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, as well.²⁸ Other efforts at eradicating or at least weakening the status of Irish Gaelic include the 1737 Administration of Justice Act, which mandated English only in Irish courts.

In the 1830s attempts to teach Irish youth in the English language were largely unsuccessful until the introduction of the English-only national schools, many run by English-speaking Catholic clergy trained at Maynooth. One clergyman who supported Gaelic bemoaned the national schools as “the graves of the national language.”²⁹ By the early nineteenth century a majority of the Irish still spoke Gaelic as a native language, and perhaps a million were monoglots. But significant shifts in public consciousness had taken place. Irish laborers who spoke some English were often paid more by English

²⁷ *Stat. Ire.*, An Act to Restrain Foreign Education, 1695, reprinted in Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 90–91.

²⁸ Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.

²⁹ Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland*, 134.

and Anglo-Irish landlords than monoglot Gaelic speakers.³⁰ The demands of emigration to England or North America — increasingly an attractive alternative given the abject poverty and misery in which most Irish lived — and the internalization of dominant attitudes led many Irish to abandon the language in the nineteenth century.

The national school curriculum explicitly associated education with speaking English, and ignorance with speaking Gaelic or other Celtic languages:

The island of Great Britain, which is composed of England, Scotland, and Wales, and the Island of Ireland, form... the British Empire in Europe. The people of these islands have one and the same language (all at least who are educated)...³¹

The Great Hunger (*An Gorta Mór*) of 1845–1849 dealt a devastating blow to Gaelic. A disproportionate number of the 1 to 1.5 million who starved were Gaelic-speaking. The “famine” also evoked a mass exodus of emigrants to England, Scotland, and North America, primarily from the poorest regions in Ireland’s west and south who were the most likely to speak Gaelic and the most vulnerable to the effects of the Great Hunger and the evictions that forced so many to die or flee. Emigration increasingly became the norm and learning English was an economic imperative.

In addition to killing or driving out over two million mostly Gaelic-speaking Irish peasants, *An Gorta Mór* also destroyed the culture and traditions of the Gaels. One resident of *Rinn na Feirste*, still a strong Gaeltacht region in west central Donegal, observed:

Fun and pleasurable past-times fell by the wayside. Poetry and music/singing and dancing stopped. The people lost and they forgot everything, and when life improved in other ways those things never returned to the way they were. The hunger killed everything.³²

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland*, 151.

³² Author’s translation from Brian Lacey, “The People Lost and Forgotten,” in *Irish Hunger*, 79.

The Northern Irish Experience

Ulster unionists viewed the emergence of the Gaelic League with suspicion and hostility. Some attacked Gaelic League members in Banbridge upon their return from their annual *feis*, or conference, in 1905.³³ Nevertheless, native speakers of Irish Gaelic survived in the glens of Antrim, in South Armagh, and in Tyrone. According to Pádraigín Ní Uallachain, the last native speaker in the six counties, Mick McCrink, died in 1977 in Dromintee, County Armagh.

At the founding of the Northern Irish state in 1920, one in four public elementary schools under Catholic management taught Gaelic as a subject. Nearly a third of the secondary public schools under Catholic management had at least one Gaelic teacher.³⁴ But an assault on funding for teaching Gaelic was launched in 1921. Concurrent with the launch of this assault was the removal of the language question from the Northern Ireland census of 1926.³⁵

By 1942 the Northern Irish government had withdrawn funding and recognition for the teaching of Gaelic itself and for Irish-language teacher training colleges. The number of students studying Gaelic dropped by 70 percent in the 1920s, and by the early 1940s no students were studying it through state-funded schools. Irish medium education did not re-emerge in Northern Ireland until 1971. Unionist politicians denounced support for “the so-called Irish language” as a waste of time and money. Gaelic was associated with political disloyalty, and dismissed as dead, dying, and as a “foreign language” of far less value than French or other major foreign languages. One unionist senator portrayed the teaching of Gaelic as part of a republican plot to drive English speakers out of Ireland. Unionists portrayed the token funding for a small number of Gaelic teachers as “forc[ing] it on the people against their wish” and “forc[ing] it down the throats of Ulster Loyalists.”³⁶ James Craig, the first Prime Minister of

³³ Liam Andrews, “The Very Dogs in Belfast Will Bark in Irish: The Unionist Government and the Irish Language 1921–1943,” in *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland*, ed. Aodan Mac Poilin (Belfast: Ultach Trust, 1997), 53.

³⁴ Andrews, “The Very Dogs in Belfast,” 55.

³⁵ Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann*, 6.

³⁶ Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann*, 6.
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Northern Ireland (1921–1940), lectured a nationalist member of the provincial parliament who criticized the defunding of the language:

What use is it to us here in this progressive, busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language? What use would it be to them? Is it not leading them along a road which has no practical value? We have not stopped such teaching... We have stopped the grants simply because we do not see that these boys being taught Irish would be any better citizens...³⁷

From the 1930s into the contemporary period, “Irish was grudgingly tolerated as a foreign language within the education system but, unlike other languages, was subject to periodic abuse from Unionist politicians.”³⁸ A 1949 Northern Ireland law prohibiting the erection of street signs in Gaelic was not repealed until the 1990s. During the mass internment launched in August 1971, Gaelic language activists were caught up in the sweep of most politically active nationalists in the North. Unionist politicians periodically denigrate Gaelic, as unionist Belfast City Councillor Sammy Wilson did more than a decade ago when he referred to it as “a leprechaun language.”³⁹ Six years ago another unionist councillor, Jim Shannon, called Gaelic “a dead language for a dead people” in an interview with the nationalist *Irish News*.⁴⁰ In 1989 Northern Ireland’s Education Minister warned parents against choosing Gaelic over another European language like French or Spanish: “Parents who choose to have their children take Irish instead of one of them, at a time when the importance of the European dimension is growing, should think carefully about the future consequences of such a decision.”⁴¹ Less than a decade ago, the Belfast City Council still prohibited speaking in

ceart na hÉireann, 71–73.

³⁷ Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann*, 82–83.

³⁸ Andrews, “The Very Dogs in Belfast,” 87.

³⁹ Sammy Wilson in *The Irish News*, 3 November 1987.

⁴⁰ September 25, 1996 *Irish News*, cited in Mac Poilin, “Plus Ça Change,” 31.

⁴¹ Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann*, 29.

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Gaelic, and to this day speaking Gaelic in elected bodies throughout the North can evoke angry interruptions from unionist politicians.⁴²

Such views are still widespread among unionists. Following an Ulster Television news item⁴³ on Britain's failure to allow residents of the six counties access to *Telefís na Gaeilge* (TG4), a Gaelic television station produced in the Connemara *Gaeltacht*, unionists posted the following comments on UTV's website:

“What is the point of teaching Irish in Northern Ireland? It would be a waste of time. No one will ever have use for it. French is the main second language taught in N.I. schools so what is the point of changing things. [sic] Irish would be as much use as Japanese so whats [sic] the point of wasting money on something that isnt [sic] that important. [sic]”
— Ballysillan Loyalist from North Belfast

“I believe Irish should be left only to those who wish to learn it & should not be foisted on most people who couldn't give a fiddlers.” — R.B. from Belfast

“Learning Irish is about as important as a course in Klingon or Esperanto. Keep Irish Republic TV stations in their own country — not ours!!” — Andrew from Yorkshire, England

“Useless foreign language TV stations like TG4 should be jammed out of the UK airwaves.” — A.H. from Enniskillen, Northern Ireland

“Why should you lot get this station!?! you want it — go down south. enough money is being wasted on you! Look at the money wasted on putting up irish signs in hospitals — when it could have went [sic] on more beds etc. Also, how did you all cope before Sinn Fein/IRA started to bring

⁴² Committee on the Administration of Justice, *Staid agus stádas na Gaeilge i dtuaisceart na hÉireann*, 33

⁴³ “Plea over Irish-language TV channel,” UTV Headlines, 30 October 2002 online at <http://www3.u.tv/news/localNews/index.asp?pt=n&cid=25047&sel=1&sel2=1&comment=2&local=1> accessed 9 September 2008). “Ulster Television” became “UTV” in 2006.

the Irish Language into all arguments? I am sure you found your way around our hospitals.” — Loyalist from Ulster

At the outset of the twenty-first century, unionist and English commentators are still echoing themes deployed in the Northern Irish parliamentary debates of the 1920s and 1930s, and centuries ago by English statutes and English observers of Ireland: Gaelic is useless; a ridiculous, outdated anachronism; a waste of scarce resources; a foreign language; equivalent to made-up, fictional languages; linked to republican traitors; a source of political division and strife; an oppressive attempt to shove something down our throats.

The Future

Over the past three decades Northern Ireland has experienced a resurgence of Irish language learning and use, particularly in the mostly Catholic nationalist community. About one in three northerners speaks the language, some 15,000 of them fluently and many on a daily basis.⁴⁴ Although many Protestants and even some unionists study Gaelic, for most *Gaelgeoiri* (non-native speakers) this revival is deeply rooted in experiences of Irish nationalist identity and an understanding of the history of British repression of the language as a tactic of colonial rule. By signing the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and by ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001 after a nine year delay, Britain committed itself and the government of Northern Ireland to taking affirmative steps to promote Irish Gaelic through education, judicial and administrative authorities, media, cultural activities, economic and social life, and transfrontier exchanges.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Diarmait MacGiolla Chríost, “Planning Issues for Irish Language Policy: ‘An Foras Teanga’ and ‘Fiontair Teanga,’” 2000, at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/language/macgiollachriost00.htm>.

⁴⁵ *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, Strasbourg, 5.xi.1992, available at <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/148.htm>. The inclusion of Ulster Scots as a language on par with Irish Gaelic in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement attests to the centrality of language to identity and the zero-sum game nature of Northern Irish politics. See Mac Giolla Chríost, “Planning Issues for

The British government almost enacted the Irish Language Act in the winter of 2007, as was agreed upon in the St. Andrew's Agreement in Scotland in November 2006. The Irish Language Act would make Irish Gaelic and official language in the six counties at a level equal to English. But, unfortunately, some unionists oppose the act. For example, Ulster Unionist Party Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Michael McGimpsey said the act was not needed. Gregory Campbell of Derry, the MLA for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), warned in May 2007 that they would veto any enacting legislation unless equivalent status is given to Ulster Scots: "It is my view that the party will not introduce or allow this. It's more about cultural equality than the introduction of the Irish Language Act. As things stand at the minute, Ulster-Scots is underfunded in comparison to the Irish Language. It is about making up [the funding gap] for Ulster-Scots rather than extending the Irish language."⁴⁶

London extended the review period for the Irish Language Act through June 2007. As the French say, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." However, in spring 2007, the world watched as Gerry Adams and DUP leader Ian Paisley sat together and agreed to create a local assembly. Adams spoke at this press conference in both English and Irish. Five years ago, when Adams spoke Irish in the Stormont assembly, Paisley and others from his party erupted in shouts. This time, Paisley listened quietly. As of early summer 2007, the north is relatively quiet, the local power-sharing government is up and running, and Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley are working together. After 600 years, at last, we are making progress!

Irish Language Policy," where he raises this as a possibility believed by many in the north: "The relatively short distance between English and Ulster-Scots causes many not to recognize the latter as a language at all, but to regard it as a degenerate variation of English." Most linguists view Ulster Scots as a dialect of lowlands Scottish English, which never gained the cultural power that the London dialect of English did. Nationalists and Irish Gaelic speakers also note that government-funded services in Ulster Scots, offered to make similar services in Irish Gaelic more palatable to unionists, have had hardly any takers. Unionists' insistence that any gain for Irish Gaelic be accompanied by an analogous gain for Ulster Scots attests to unspoken assumptions about the role of the English language in Ireland today.

⁴⁶ "DUP 'will veto Irish language act,'" *Irish Times*, 5 May 2007.