

A chathaoirligh agus a dhaoine uaisle,

I would like to thank you for your invitation here today. When I addressed another joint committee of the Houses of the Oireachtas at the beginning of last month, I hadn't expected to be back here today and it's an honour and a privilege to have received your invitation. I announced here at the beginning of December that I had decided to stand aside from the position of Coimisinéir Teanga in a month's time, on 23rd February, when I will have completed 10 years in that capacity. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those people who have contacted me in the meantime; I appreciate very much all of the messages of goodwill which I received locally, nationally and internationally.

Before I focus on the theme for discussion today – the 20-year Strategy for the Irish language – I would like to mention the main reason that I decided to resign as Coimisinéir Teanga. I had, in essence, come to the firm belief that in the two years which remained in my term of office, there would be little else that I could personally achieve in relation to language rights for Irish speakers and Gaeltacht communities.

Marginalisation of Irish

I believe that the language is continuously being edged aside, pushed towards the margins of society and that includes much of the public sector. I would not support the premise that the fault lies primarily with politicians but it appears to me, notwithstanding those within the State sector who support the language, that there are stronger and more widespread forces in place who have little or no concern for the future of our national language.

Some progress has been made over the past 10 years since the introduction of the Official Languages Act – particularly in the use of Irish on public signage, in stationery and in publications. There is a greater awareness of language rights and our Office supports this.

The neglect in promoting the language scheme element of the Act has resulted in severe restrictions on the progress which might have been made. I believe there is no possibility that the new system being introduced to increase the number of civil servants fluent in Irish will succeed. A commitment that State service through Irish be provided in Gaeltacht areas without terms and conditions is not forthcoming and consequently, the practice will persist where the State sector is effectively saying to Gaeltacht communities: *"Speak Irish among yourselves, but don't speak it to us!"*. More than two years have elapsed since a review of the Official Languages Act began, yet at this stage, the very first step in amending the legislation – the publication of 'heads of a bill' has not been taken. A new deadline was announced last week for the

publication of the amendments – before summer. A decision to merge the functions of my Office with the Office of the Ombudsman was made without reference to me or to the then Ombudsman, yet again more than two years later, no details are available publicly of the proposed new arrangement or how it is thought it might work. It was announced last week that the merger will happen by next September.

I believe that the Office was never given adequate resources to fully perform its statutory obligations in a satisfactory manner.

For those who believe in language rights for Gaeltacht communities and for Irish speakers in general this is a time of great uncertainty. I have always held the opinion that the support required for the Irish language within this country's public service should not and could not be viewed as an optional extra. Language rights are permanent rights; they are not concessions or privileges granted at times of prosperity.

If the State cannot provide assurances, when the language legislation is being amended, that it will ensure that it can communicate in Irish with Gaeltacht communities without terms and conditions and that it will have adequate staff in public administration with proficiency in Irish, then I believe that its policy will be viewed as a sham.

The choice I had was to stand aside from my appointment as Coimisinéir Teanga on principle to draw attention to these matters or to continue in my role and, consequently, to participate in a pretence. I am absolutely certain that I made the correct decision. The process of appointing a new commissioner has now begun and I would like to extend my best wishes to whoever is appointed as my successor.

The Strategy

I understand that as a subcommittee you have a particular focus on the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish language and that you wish me to direct some of my comments today to that matter.

I played an active part in the preparation of the Strategy – I published recommendations on the subject and I met with the group of international experts established to advise on the drafting of the Strategy.

I stated – when launching Ard-Fheis Chonradh na Gaeilge in 2008 – that the implementation of the strategy could be amongst the most important actions for the future of the language since the foundation of the State. I also gave a very clear warning at the time: *“It is important that we do not forget that any strategy is worthless unless it is implemented. The agreement and publication of the strategy must be a starting point on a new journey and not the destination.”*

The following year, I stated that it was necessary to begin the implementation of the strategy effectively and without delay, and, if that were not to happen, and if it were to be treated in the same manner as countless other commendable reports, then it would be preferable to discard it immediately to avoid further cynicism. I stated at that time that actions in accordance with the commitments were required rather than empty promises.

So, is the Strategy being implemented? I don't know. And with all due respect to you as a subcommittee, I believe that you don't know either as there is no independent audit or review being conducted on the implementation of the Strategy.

It is self-assessment only and from the experience of my Office in auditing the language schemes of State bodies over the past 10 years, little value or importance can be attached in reality to self-assessment. In any area of life, it is difficult to depend on any review by stakeholders with vested interests, but, on the other hand, research based evidence is of immense value. We have also learned a valuable lesson over the years – that there is a basis for the phrase “what gets measured gets done!” Unless audits and independent assessments are carried out I don't believe anyone can give any guarantees as to implementation.

But a person may have an opinion: here is an opinion from an expert.

Seosamh Mac Donnacha from the National University of Ireland, Galway, was (with Conchúr Ó Giollagáin) one of the authors of *“The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht”* - research work which prompted the Strategy.

Speaking at Tóstal na Gaeilge last year, he said that the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language no longer existed. *“I am aware that we have a document which we call The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030. But a document and a Strategy are not one and the same. We do not have a **live** Strategy that is being implemented in a consistent systematic manner...”* (trans.)

Dr John Walsh, another expert, had the following to say in this month's edition of the magazine Comhar: *“The 20-Year Strategy is now like a corpse and the Irish language is more marginalised than ever in the Civil Service.”*(trans.)

“A dead document”

Seosamh Mac Donnacha described the Strategy as *‘a dead document’* and he also said that the Department of the Gaeltacht no longer exists – *“we merely have a sub-section which deals with the Irish language and Gaeltacht issues – a sub-section of a department which is large and diverse... And that sub-section is located far from the centre of power (in Na Forbacha, Conamara); it is at the bottom of the internal power chain within its own department; and that parent department is at the bottom of the power chain to which all the Government Departments belong, which means that it is difficult for it to have any significant impact on policy formulation or on the implementation of the policies of those other departments which have a central role in the implementation of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish language...”* (trans.)

The core issue for him is that a sub-section which is operating in those circumstances could not protect or preserve what is left of the Gaeltacht, and that we are only fooling ourselves if we think it could.

It is a pessimistic assessment, but unfortunately, I am very aware that many in the Gaeltacht communities and Irish speakers in general share that view. The writer, Seosamh Mac Grianna, once said that the truth is not just bitter but savage which is why it is avoided.

I firmly believe that if this debate is to succeed, it must be based on the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I have no wish to be negative about this, but I believe that the starting point must always be based on reality rather than on a presumption based on unfounded hope. Groupthink has no place in matters as important as the survival of a language.

Based on census figures from 2002, it was argued in 2007 that the Irish language would survive no more than 15-20 years as the predominant community language in the strongest Gaeltacht areas that remained. Of course, it will survive as a language, and the last native Irish speaker has not yet been born. But that in no way equates to its survival as the predominant community language, handed down in an unbroken chain, from generation to generation. As someone who cares about the future of the language and the Gaeltacht and as a person who has spent the most of his life living in the Gaeltacht, it doesn't appear to me that significant actions or worthwhile, practical steps have been taken on the ground to address the scale of the language emergency in the Gaeltacht since that very clear warning was given seven years ago.

Tick-Tock

A new Gaeltacht Act has been enacted, although the welcome it received could hardly be said to have resounded through the hills and glens of the Gaeltacht. It changed the structure of the board of Údarás na Gaeltachta and, in conjunction with the Údarás and Foras na Gaeilge, placed liability for language planning on Gaeltacht communities who never sought that responsibility. Economic planning would not be left to such local communities nor would they be given responsibility to decide locally on matters concern housing, roads or the environment. But when it comes to the language, well, that's another story!

Certain areas have been chosen and more will be chosen to prepare language plans; they will be given two years to prepare the plans and seven years to implement them. Meanwhile tick-tock, *Tempus fugit* and if, as is said in Irish, "God's mills grind slowly" it appears the wheels of the state turn more slowly still, particularly in the case of the language. When I see the sorry state of the system put in place to develop language plans or language schemes in State bodies because of ineffective implementation, it is unfortunately very difficult for me to have any confidence in the new language planning system envisaged in the Gaeltacht Act.

Indeed, I very much doubt if those who are officially responsible for directing the implementation of the Strategy and the language planning initiative, truly believe, in their heart of hearts, that there is any realistic hope that these policies will in fact succeed or bear fruit. And, certainly, if those charged with that responsibility don't believe in it, then surely there is little reason for anybody else to have any faith in it either: no social legislation can be effectively implemented unless the public in general has confidence in it and supports it.

The Act and the Strategy

With regard to the Irish language in the State sector, I recently read an article by a retired senior civil servant who said, in his opinion, that there was *“growing evidence that there is a strategy afoot to do away with what’s left of Irish in the public life of the county.”*

Seán Mag Leannáin spent 15 years as a principal officer in the civil service until he retired in December 2009. He said:

“The civil service establishment...are almost 100 per cent united in their view of Irish as an irritating thorn in the administration. The mandarins know there isn’t political consensus on the issue and they calculate that even to open a public debate on Irish would be to accord it a status it doesn’t deserve – far better to ignore it as if it didn’t exist and to starve the Official Languages Act of the resources to implement it. Let the whole thing wither on the vine...”

Furthermore he had this to say; *“When the Official Languages Act was passed over 10 years ago the top civil servants adopted a minimalist, wait-and-see approach. They knew that without their active support the new legislation was never going to have much effect. But what started as passive inaction on their part now seems to have moved up a notch or two to one of active undermining.*

It reminds me of a phrase used by our President Michael D Higgins, speaking at the biennial Tóstal na Gaeilge conference in Galway in 2010, when he referred to those “for whom Irish was not half dead enough.”

What an interesting perspective from a courageous man who was at the centre of the state sector.

A commitment was made in the Strategy that a system would be put in place whereby the number of staff in the public service who could conduct their business in Irish would be increased. I have already referred to this new system that is to be put in place on a pilot basis. Perhaps it is simply enough to say that research carried out on our behalf found that, based on official figures from the Department of Education and Skills, it would take this new system, if implemented fully and positively, about 28 years to double the percentage of administrative staff in that department with fluency in Irish, from 1.5% to 3%.

It was further promised on page 45 of the Strategy that language schemes would, in future, specify positions within State bodies where ability in Irish would be required. The Strategy was published in December 2010 – more than three years ago. A total of 26 new language schemes have been confirmed over those past three years but, to date, not even one position in one language scheme has been specified as one where ability in Irish was required!

I should also point out that Government departments have nominated Irish language officers or other officials responsible for language affairs to implement the Official Languages Act and to liaise with my Office. These are all talented people who diligently carry out their responsibilities, nonetheless only six out of the 16 officers in question actually have Irish; in other words, 10 of these officers who have responsibility for the language coordination in Government departments don’t actually have Irish themselves.

A series of plans and policies were announced to reform and modernise the public sector last week; as far as I am aware, the words 'language' 'Irish' or 'Gaeltacht' were not mentioned once in these documents.

Education

The Strategy for the Irish language places great emphasis on the place of Irish in the education system and I welcome the decision of the Department of Education and Skills to review the provision of education in the Gaeltacht.

However, I am particularly concerned about this issue in the light of that Department's attitude as reflected in two education related investigations carried out by my Office recently.

In one case, a Gaeltacht primary school complained to me that it had been directed by the Department of Education to appoint a teacher from a panel of surplus teachers although neither the teachers themselves, nor the school authority in question, believed that any of the available teachers had sufficient Irish to teach in a Gaeltacht school.

The following is a random sample of emails sent by the teachers on the panel to the school authorities:

"...With respect to you, your principal and your pupils, I feel that my standard of Irish would not reach the requirement needed for a Gaeltacht school and Gaeltacht life in general..."

"... To tell the truth, I am rather worried because you are a Gaelscoil and there are native speakers attending the school."(trans).

"I am sorry....I do not have sufficient Irish to work in the Gaeltacht."(trans).

"Unfortunately I don't think I would be the best person for the job and I'm sure there's someone on the panel with more experience in Gaelscoileanna and fluency with Irish than I have."

In spite of that – and despite the fact that some of the pupils would have better Irish than the teachers themselves in this situation – the Department put forward legal and practical arguments to say that there was no need for special arrangements for the Gaeltacht and that every primary school teacher in the country was qualified to teach in a Gaeltacht school. However, I found, as a result of that investigation, that certain provisions of the Education Acts were breached in this case and I made recommendations in line with that finding.

In another case, the Department of Education and Skills again put forward legal and practical arguments as to why it was not obliged to provide the option of studying the subjects of the curriculum through Irish up to Leaving Certificate level to students in one of the strongest Gaeltacht regions remaining in Co. Donegal. The school in question has an Irish language stream up to Junior Certificate level but few students opt for this as they would have to change their language of learning from Irish to English for the two final and most important years, the years of the Leaving Certificate. The investigation by my Office found that the refusal of the

Department of Education to provide education through Irish to Gaeltacht students breached its own statutory obligations and in this case also I made recommendations to remedy the situation.

I suspect that you will, in light of this, understand my concern about the educational element of the Strategy.

Undoubtedly however, the root of our problem is that we have never made an adequate connection between the learning of Irish and its subsequent use. The State requires students to learn the languages but often the same State denies or obstructs the use of Irish by those people in their dealings with the State. There is a disconnect and a failure of joined up thinking there.

Stakeholders

I have referred already to the absence of any independent monitoring of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish language. Efforts are being made for some time now to have the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities recognised officially as stakeholders by affording them a role in directing the implementation of the 20-Year Strategy. However, for whatever reason, the State sector has refused to concede to that proposal. I find this difficult to understand as I once again recall that social legislation cannot be effectively implemented without the confidence and support of the public in general.

We do hear a lot of buzzwords about interdepartmental committees, bi-lateral talks and implementation plans, but do these amount to positive practical action? This reminds me of the latest story brought to light by the journalist Breandán Delap from the files of the National Archive released under the 30 year rule. He discovered official documents concerning The Four Year Action Plan for the Irish Language, published in 1983, by the state organisation, Bord na Gaeilge. This was a substantial and significant document in which targets were identified in respect of every aspect of the State sector. However, when the political and civil service inputs had been taken into account all that remained of that ambitious plan were proposals to establish a framework of committees to make recommendations with regard to the use of Irish in public life.

This reminded the journalist of Séamus Mallon's wry comment concerning the Good Friday Agreement as being "Sunningdale for slow learners." *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* How unfortunate it would be if the same fate were to befall the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish language!

As I prepared to address you here today, I recalled statements made by two of our heroes who passed way in the last year, may they rest in peace – Nelson Mandela who said "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

And Seamus Heaney, who said "Not to learn Irish is to miss the opportunity of understanding what life in this country has meant and could mean in a better future. It is to cut oneself off from ways of being at home. If we regard self-understanding, mutual understanding,

imaginative enhancement, cultural diversity and a tolerant political atmosphere as desirable attainments, we should remember that knowledge of the Irish language is an essential element in their realisation.”

We have two simple choices – to look back at Irish as our lost language or forward with it as a core part of our heritage and sovereignty. But I would say to you with certainty here today in the Houses of the Oireachtas, that it is with heavy hearts that the people of the Gaeltacht and the Irish speaking community in general will approach the centenary of the 1916 Rising in two years time if our national language is to be merely a symbolic language, and rather than being an integral part of our culture and heritage, that it is pushed aside, marginalised and left in the in the halfpenny place in the life of this nation.

Thank you for your invitation to address you today.

(ENDS)

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HEADLINES over the past 10 years: 2004-2014;

- Complaints ... 6,126 to 31 December 2013, (28% from the Gaeltacht)
- 23% of complaints related to Government Departments and Offices, 32% to local authorities and the rest to a wide range of state organisations
- 1,862 requests for advice concerning language obligations from state organisations
- 96 formal investigations undertaken
- 213 reviews/audits of language schemes completed
- 9 annual reports and audited financial accounts published
- 6 special reports laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas
- Website developed as a one stop shop on all aspect of language rights and obligations
- Language Rights Charter published
- Guidebook to the Official Languages Act published
- Recommendations on the reform of the Official Languages Act published
- Television advertising campaigns on language rights developed and broadcast
- Educational resource on Language Rights for the Junior Certificate Civic, Social and Political Education (CPSE) course developed and distributed to schools
- Language rights event commemorating Myles Joyce and the Maamtrasna Murders organised in Galway
- Participation in numerous events to develop awareness of language rights and obligations
- Lectures given on language rights in almost all third level institutions in Ireland
- Regular assistance given in relation to national and international research on language rights and obligations
- Advice and training provided through the OSCE to the Government of Kosovo on the establishment of a language commissioner's office in Kosovo
- International conference on language rights organised in Dublin
- Proactive in establishing the International Association of Language Commissioners