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Against exclusionary Gaelic language policy: A response to Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul

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Timothy Currie Armstrong*

Abstract

This article considers a range of weaknesses and deficiencies in the article ‘Moving Beyond Asocial Minority-Language Policy’ by Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Iain Caimbeul and the underlying research study on which it was based. The authors’ presentation of previous research was inadequate and the framing of their survey results was sensationalistic, risking the demoralisation of Gaelic speakers and the weakening of social or political support for the language. The authors fail to justify and properly define the key terms used in their analysis, including ‘vernacular community’ and ‘Gaelic group’, so that there is a pervasive lack of clarity to their discussion, with serious implications for their key policy proposal. We also identify shortcomings in the geographic framing of their study; which areas were included and which were not. We then challenge the social classification they use in their analysis, and their rigid distinction between Gaelic speakers in their study area and all those living elsewhere. We then demonstrate how the authors’ presentation of current Gaelic policy is incomplete, misleading and biased, and we critique their proposals for fundamental changes to the current policy structure, including the creation of a new Gaelic community trust. We argue that strengthening existing policy structures and exploiting such structures much more energetically and effectively offers a better approach to strengthening the language, both in the areas studied and elsewhere in the country.

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Keywords: Gaelic, language policy, development, neoliberalism, postmodernism

Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Iain Caimbeul's article 'Moving Beyond Asocial Minority-Language Policy' (2021) builds on the argument initially presented in the book *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a) produced by the Soillse research project's Islands Gaelic Research Project (IGRP). The IGRP book is extraordinarily dense but often strident in tone, characterising Gaelic policymakers, Gaelic learners and Gaelic academics in sharply negative terms. It has been deeply controversial for a range of reasons, and so far policymakers have not accepted its main arguments and proposals (Ó Giollagáin 2021).

This article will discuss a number of weaknesses and deficiencies in the *Scottish Affairs* article and the underlying IGRP book. We begin by showing how the framing of the survey results was sensationalistic, risking the demoralisation of Gaelic speakers and the weakening of social or political support for the language. We then explain how the authors fail to justify the key terms used in their analysis, so that there is a pervasive lack of clarity to the discussion. We also identify shortcomings in the geographic framing of their study. In the following section, we critique the social classification they use in their analysis. We then demonstrate how the authors' presentation of current Gaelic policy is incomplete, misleading and biased, and we critique their proposals for fundamental changes to the current policy structure.

It was highly inappropriate for the editors of the *Scottish Affairs* special issue on 'Gàidhealtachd Futures' to publish Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul's article, and an article by another of the IGRP book's authors, Gordon Camshron (2021), as the only contributions dealing with Gaelic policy and sociolinguistics. These works are unrepresentative of current thinking in the field and they distort current policy and debates in important ways. This editorial misjudgement did the readership of the journal a serious disservice; our article, bringing together the opinions of several leading academics in this area, attempts to address this imbalance.

Previous research and the irresponsible presentation of research findings

Language shift from Gaelic to English in the Gàidhealtachd¹ has been ongoing since the eighteenth century. In district after district, Gaelic was replaced by English, first in the south

¹ See the companion response article by Armstrong et al. for an explanation of the term Gàidhealtachd and its evolution over time.

and east, then the north and west. By the 1970s language shift was under way in the Western Isles, the last area where Gaelic remained in general community use (McLeod 2020: 17-26). Proactive policy initiatives to support Gaelic began in the mid-1970s and strengthened from the 1980s. These measures were predicated on a recognition that the sociolinguistic position of the language was increasingly fragile.

Census data indicated a large drop in the proportion of Gaelic speakers in the islands' population, from 78% in 1971 to 52% in 2011. A number of sociolinguistic studies from the 1970s onwards, and especially from the 1990s, analysed and quantified the impact of this language shift. Many of these were carried out by the late Kenneth MacKinnon (e.g., MacKinnon 1977, 2006). Further studies in the 21st century, including those by the Western Isles Language Plan project (2004), Mac an Tàilleir et al. (2011) and Rothach et al. (2016), showed a serious decline in community language use, even in situations where Gaelic speakers were aware it was possible for them to use Gaelic, and markedly lower Gaelic use on the part of younger people.

The IGRP book demonstrates, as would have been expected from previous research, that the trajectory of language shift has continued. Dispiriting as they are, the findings were therefore of little surprise to policymakers, activists or sociolinguists. However, although it provides a detailed analysis of trajectories in census data, the book makes no real attempt to situate the study in the context of previous research, thereby obscuring the extent to which the study is confirmatory rather than foundational. In particular, the book gives very little information concerning the Shawbost report (Mac an Tàilleir et al. 2011), which examined the community use of Gaelic in extensive detail.

More important, however, the way the study was presented to the media was unduly sensationalistic. This involved the authors' headline conclusion that Gaelic would effectively die out as a community language in the Western Isles within the next ten years. This conclusion was reached by ascribing immense significance to the figure of 45% Gaelic density, a problematic decision discussed below. As could readily have been predicted, the authors' stark presentation was then repackaged in the media in still more alarmist terms. As an example: *The Guardian's* headline announced 'Scots Gaelic could die out within a decade, study finds' (2 July 2020), suggesting that the language would die out entirely and not only as a community language in the Western Isles. It was irresponsible on the part of the authors not to frame the results of the study in a more measured fashion. There is a clear risk that negative framing of this kind can demoralise speakers and lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of language abandonment and non-transmission (see e.g., McEwan-Fujita 2006).

The IGRP authors probably believed that alarmist framing and rhetoric would shake policy-makers and the wider public into action, galvanising them to take radical action on behalf of the language. This assumes a degree of institutional and public support for Gaelic that is simply not there; many people would be indifferent, and some quite content to see the language drop off the policy agenda or disappear entirely. The report was met with glee by commentators hostile to Gaelic on social and traditional media (e.g., Maher 2020) and even *The National*, a paper which might have been expected to be relatively supportive of the language, ran an opinion column that used the findings to argue that ‘no amount of effort can now stop Gaelic turning into a dead language’ (Fry 2020).

Undefined terms and other analytical deficiencies

A striking weakness of the IGRP book, and Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul’s *Scottish Affairs* article, is the extent to which the principal terms used for analysis are either unexplained or unjustifiable. In addition, the parameters of the IGRP study are questionable in several important respects. These deficiencies significantly detract from the effectiveness of the analysis and argument.

The subtitle of the book² bills itself as *A Comprehensive Survey of Scottish Gaelic*, but it is plainly much less than comprehensive, as three quarters of Gaelic speakers in Scotland live outside the area under consideration, i.e., the Western Isles, the Isle of Tiree, and Staffin in the Isle of Skye (Mac an Tàilleir 2015: 8, 16; census table LC2199SC for Staffin). One of the key tasks of a genuinely comprehensive study would be to examine the variations in sociolinguistic dynamics in different areas, including the southern Hebrides, the mainland Highlands and the urban Lowlands, showing how the social role of the language differs in areas of lower density. Yet the book makes no attempt to do this. The narrowed parameters of the study could be justified on the basis of limited resources, but the decision to restrict its focus actually appears to rest on the authors’ theoretical assumptions, which, as discussed below, involve drawing a highly questionable bright-line distinction between Gaelic speakers in the study area, who purportedly form a distinct ‘Gaelic group’, and all other speakers, who are excluded from this group.

² The title itself is odd. *The Vernacular Crisis in the Gaelic Community* would make more sense, or *The Crisis in the Vernacular Gaelic Community*, or simply *The Vernacular Gaelic Crisis*. One suspects the title was chosen in order to generate the slogan/hashtag ‘Gaelic Crisis’.

The area studied broadly corresponds to the areas of highest Gaelic density, particularly the Western Isles, but the inclusion of Tiree and the exclusion of parts of Skye other than Staffin are more problematic. As discussed below, the authors assert that the figure of 45% Gaelic density is hugely significant for language vitality. Yet Tiree recorded only 38.3% at the 2011 census. In a different way, it is odd to carve out Staffin from the rest of Skye, given its tight socio-economic connection to the rest of the island and the not inconsiderable strength of Gaelic elsewhere, notably Sleat, which was excluded from the study despite having a higher proportion of Gaelic speakers than Tiree (Scotland's Census 2011: Table QS211SC). This area, home to the Gaelic college Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and a centre of Gaelic revitalisation activity, would have made a very useful case study. Four things are particularly notable about Sleat: (1) not only are percentages of speakers slightly higher than in Tiree, but, they are also somewhat more stable, declining five percentage points between 2001 and 2011, while Tiree declined ten percentage points (Mac an Tàilleir 2015: 29); (2) Gaelic use is significantly institutionalised in Sleat; it is possible to pursue Gaelic-medium education from preschool all the way up to university level; (3) there are a relatively large number of Gaelic-essential employment opportunities in Sleat, not just in education, but also in the Gaelic-related projects and businesses based at the college; (4) a significant number of local Gaelic speakers are new speakers³, many of whom have relocated to Sleat to work and live in a Gaelic environment, thus illustrating the important contribution that new speakers can make to local language revival efforts. Yet the authors make no attempt to explain or justify the boundaries of their study other than a footnote noting that 'residual vernacular networks' - a term they do not define - 'are to be found in other areas of Scotland' (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020: 1 fn. 1).⁴

The authors ascribe immense significance to the figure of 45% Gaelic density, which they postulate means that only 15% of the population will use Gaelic actively. They argue that once density drops below this level, the language becomes 'moribund', having 'lost nearly all communal vitality and collective ability to transmit Gaelic to subsequent

³ The term 'new speaker' refers to 'people who did not acquire Gaelic in the home when growing up, but have nevertheless acquired Gaelic to a significant degree of competence and are now making active use of the language in their lives' (McLeod, O'Rourke and Dunmore 2014: 2). In many cases this will include 'vernacular' family and social usage.

⁴ In this short article it is not possible to draw attention to all the deficiencies of the authors' analysis. Note the additional points of critique in Nance 2021 (and the authors' unconvincing reply thereto (Ó Curnáin and Ó Giollagáin 2021)).

generations' (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 67). The prospect that more areas would fall below the 45% threshold by 2031 was the key plank for their prediction of imminent linguistic collapse. However, they never really set out any evidentiary basis for this position. The obvious way to test it would be to compare the dynamics of language use in a community with somewhat higher density (say 55%) to one with 40% density. Several communities within their study area were already below 45% in 2011 (Tiree and Stornoway and environs) (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 33), but the authors made no attempt to make an assessment of this kind.

The decision to ascribe such significance to the 45% level is peculiar. As the authors themselves note (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020: 27), it is conventional in assessing language viability to set a much higher threshold, sometimes 70.22%, as this means that there is a greater than 50% chance that any two people who encounter each other will both speak the minority language. It is significant that an earlier study in the Irish Gaeltacht led by Prof Ó Giollagáin argued that 'if the proportion of active Irish speakers in a Gaeltacht population falls below 67%, the use of Irish as a community and family language becomes increasingly unsustainable' (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007: 12). For the current project, however, none of the areas studied even come close to this level (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 33). Unfortunately, the data are more clearly interpreted as showing that a significant decline in the social role of Gaelic in the Western Isles occurred at least 25 or 30 years ago (p. 69), not that this is about to happen unless urgent action is taken.

The principal analytical terms used in the book are 'vernacular speaker' and 'vernacular community'. Neither term is ever defined, even though 'vernacular community' in particular is a neologism almost never used in the field of sociolinguistics prior to the book's publication. One suspects the term 'vernacular speaker' was adopted as a device to avoid the more familiar but problematic term 'native speaker', which has long been challenged by linguists (as Ó Giollagáin et al. note, 2020: 338). It is particularly unhelpful in the Gaelic context, given that many 'native speakers', including the great majority of younger speakers, have been bilingual since birth and grew up hearing and using English much more often than Gaelic.

The most obvious meaning of the term 'vernacular speaker' would be someone who uses Gaelic as their principal language of social interaction, including family interaction. This is potentially a useful concept, as it emphasises actual linguistic practice rather than the

trajectory by which the language was acquired or assessments of social origin. A Glaswegian who learned Gaelic in school and now uses it daily with their partner, children and a network of close friends would be a ‘vernacular speaker’ based on such an understanding. By the same token, one’s status as ‘vernacular speaker’ would not be fixed according to place of upbringing or linguistic trajectory in childhood; someone raised in a Gaelic-speaking family in an island community who moved away and stopped using Gaelic with any regularity would no longer be a ‘vernacular speaker’.

But this does not seem to be the sense of the term ‘vernacular speaker’ as used by the authors. As noted, they apply it only within narrow territorial limits, so that there is no attempt to assess the extent and dynamics of vernacular Gaelic use in the rest of the Highlands and Islands, or elsewhere in Scotland. In the 2011 census 24,971 people reported that they spoke Gaelic at home, which provides one indicator of vernacular use. Of these, only 45% lived in the study area (Mac an Tàilleir 2015: 12; census table LC2199SC for Staffin and Tiree), again belying the book’s claim to ‘comprehensiveness’. Similarly, in light of the authors’ repeated use of terms like ‘ethnolinguistic’ it seems this category is to be understood in social as much as linguistic terms.

If one understands the term ‘vernacular speaker’ in terms of informal routine use, then the authors’ neologism ‘vernacular community’ might then be understood as a community in which the (great) majority of the members use Gaelic as their vernacular language. The difficulty is that the data presented in the book - and by a series of earlier studies, as noted above - show that no area in Scotland can properly be classified as such. Even in the rural areas of the Western Isles, a third or more of the population cannot speak Gaelic and many who can speak the language, especially younger people, use it much less frequently than English. Indeed, the authors concede that ‘there is no surviving multigenerational Gaelic-dominant vernacular community’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 78) and that this has been the case for some time.

It would be more helpful to think in terms of ‘vernacular networks’, by which people are linked with other speakers (cf. Armstrong 2020). This aligns more closely with modern sociolinguistic understandings. (e.g., Brenzinger & Heinrich 2013). Clearly in Scotland there are many such networks, of varying thickness and with varying characteristics. By far the thickest of these would be in the Western Isles, but any attempt at a comprehensive analysis

would need to consider the fuller picture. This is particularly important in terms of strategic policy; how can weak networks be strengthened?

Although vernacular usage of Gaelic is clearly very important, it is also crucial to promote the use of the language in other contexts, including education, the workplace, public administration, media and so on. For most of the twentieth century, when vernacular Gaelic use was stronger, the language was effectively excluded from more formal domains. This had the effect of constricting speakers' language skills and, more importantly, their understanding of the value and potential of Gaelic, which had significant knock-on consequences in terms of non-transmission of the language. Expanding the reach of the language so that it is used in a wider range of contexts, especially work-related contexts, has rightly been a key element of the Gaelic revitalisation project (McLeod 2020: 234-35).

Surprisingly - and in contrast to the earlier Shawbost study (Mac an Tàilleir et al. 2011), which assessed the use of Gaelic in a wide range of community settings - the IGRP book confines its analysis of Gaelic language use to home and family contexts, and does not attempt to study the wider community role of the language. Again, this undermines the claim of 'comprehensiveness'.

A central analytical concept of Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul's article, and the IGRP book, is 'the Gaelic group' (2021: 180, 181), but they never explain what exactly this group consists of or who belongs to it. They offer this somewhat obscurantist footnote: 'We use the term Gaelic group to refer to the vernacular context. Gaelic communities mostly refers to the more general social context of Gaelic, comprising its vernacular, migrant community, learner and L2 networks' (2021: 208 fn. 2). The 'Gaelic group' appears to be confined to Gaelic speakers living in the specific study area, thereby excluding all speakers in the rest of the Hebrides, the mainland Highlands, and Lowland Scotland. At the same time, they confuse the picture further by repeatedly using the terms 'ethnolinguistic' and 'indigenous' to refer to the 'Gaelic group', which would appear to demand some ancestry-based definition and to exclude Gaelic speakers living in the study area who come from different social backgrounds (e.g., Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021: 180, 181, 182). They also use the shorthand form 'the Gaels' to refer to this territorially limited group, to the exclusion of all speakers elsewhere (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021: 203, 207).

A final undefined term in the *Scottish Affairs* article is ‘asocial’, which Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul use to characterise current Gaelic language policy.⁵ The American Psychological Association definition of this term is ‘declining to engage, or incapable of engaging, in social interaction’ or ‘lacking sensitivity or regard for social values or norms’ (<https://dictionary.apa.org/asocial>). It seems an odd adjective to apply to any kind of public policy. The implication may be that they believe current Gaelic policy gives insufficient attention to the wider social context of language use - but in the absence of any explanation from the authors this can only be speculation.

Deficiencies of the social analysis

Perhaps the most serious flaw of the study is its analytically invalid theoretical foundation. The IGRP authors posit a fundamental distinction between two different Gaelic ‘constituencies’, ‘i.e. the indigenous Gaelic community on the one hand, and other networks outside the Western Isles on the other’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 362). As noted above, they refer to the former ‘constituency’ as ‘the Gaelic group’ or ‘the Gaels’, with the necessary consequence that anyone living outside this area is not part of ‘the Gaelic group’ or indeed a ‘Gael’. Above and beyond the definitional problems, the posited distinction is highly questionable in sociological terms; it makes more sense to think in terms of a single, albeit substantially differentiated Gaelic community in which there are myriad interconnections of different kinds. Perhaps most problematically, many people leave the Gaelic-dense island areas for education and work opportunities, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently, and many island families have relatives living elsewhere with whom they interact frequently.

The shortcomings of the authors’ framing are not merely analytical in nature, however, because they argue that there has been a systematic bias in policy in favour of the second group in a way that has wrought harm to the ‘vernacular group’ (e.g. Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020b: 12). Moreover, speakers outside the Western Isles, especially Gaelic learners, are characterised in highly negative terms, with much rhetoric about ‘neoliberal individualism’, ‘performed identity’ and so on (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021: 180, 196). The authors go so far as to declare that:

⁵ On one occasion they use the alternative formulation ‘asocietal’ (p. 197). This word does not appear to exist.

... the current policy trajectory can only provide a context for “resource extraction” from the dwindling vernacular group, mainly to serve the requirements of those participating in the metropolitan aspirations of a Gaelic postmodernity on behalf of those who do not possess this vernacular resource (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 418).

It is little surprise that harsh rhetoric of this kind has caused not only controversy and offence but demoralisation, as people, including many who are highly active in Gaelic social, community and professional activities, feel they are devalued or marginalised.

Another serious shortcoming is the failure to engage with any understanding of the term ‘community’ other than the most rigidly territorial. The authors appear to be locked into a traditional, static conception of ‘community’ by which the residents of a particular place engage frequently with the relatives, neighbours and other residents of their local area, with any interaction with people elsewhere being much less frequent or significant. An extensive body of work in geography and sociolinguistics has flagged up the declining significance of territoriality and boundedness in relation to everyday life and interaction (e.g., Jones and Lewis 2019), yet the authors show no awareness of how considerably the nature of social life has changed in recent decades, even in low-density island areas (Lewis and McLeod 2021). By the same token, the authors give no attention to the rapidly increasing role of electronic communication and interaction. New technologies such as social media and web conferencing mean that our most frequent and most important social relationships may well be with people who are physically distant. This trend is most markedly the case with younger people. While there are obvious differences between physical presence and remote electronic communication, and the concept of ‘virtual communities’ sometimes attracts a degree of hype (Cunliffe 2021), it seems old-fashioned to exclude this dimension from the analysis altogether. For the IGRP authors, however, questions concerning the changing nature of social life are dismissed as symptoms of an idle ‘postmodernism’.

One of the oddest aspects of the IGRP book is the authors’ emphasis on the role of what they call ‘discursivism’ and their concern with particular strands in academic sociolinguistic work on Gaelic. It is never made clear exactly what ‘discursivism’ is supposed to mean, although the authors make the rather extravagant claim that ‘language from such a perspective is what certain academics or policy-officials say it is, rather than a lived and meaningful socio-cultural experience and practice’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020: 388). Following

this line of thinking, it seems that conducting a study of urban Gaelic speakers and considering how to increase their opportunities to use the language somehow amount to some kind of ‘denial’ or ‘erasure’ of the challenges facing island communities, ‘a postmodern fiddler playing on while vernacular speech goes up in flames!’ (p. 12). Presented so baldly, these propositions seem greatly overwrought.

This aspect of the book seems like so much dragon-slaying, but the authors clearly have a strong antipathy to some currents in contemporary sociolinguistics. Whatever their currency or intellectual value more generally, however, these theories have actually had relatively little impact on Gaelic sociolinguistic work, to say nothing of actual Gaelic policy. The authors imagine a turn away from ‘an engagement with Gaelic as a vernacular of rural speaker groups to . . . an emphasis on Gaelic as a post-spatial, aspirational, non-vernacular language’ around the beginning of the millennium (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 406), but this is effectively a figment of their imagination.

The IGRP book makes repeated use of the term ‘neoliberal’ to criticise aspects of Gaelic-related policy or activity, but never really explain its application. Unsurprisingly, there is no discussion of issues one normally associates with neoliberalism such as business regulation, employment law, taxation or monetary policy. Instead, the critique appears to involve concerns about ‘neoliberal individualism’, the idea that within the neoliberal ‘zeitgeist’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 385) people are driven to undertake projects of individual self-definition to secure social or economic advantage of some kind. Ó Giollagáin has presented his view most starkly in his critique of Irish language policy, claiming that there has been a ‘takeover’ of the language by ‘the sympathetic middle class’, ‘a diffuse fusion of enthused individuals receiving rewards and encouragement by performing Irish in supportive institutional settings’ (Ó Giollagáin 2020).

One senses not so much a disdain for neoliberalism but for cultural liberalism more generally, in relation to the various manifestations among 21st century Gaelic speakers of what the IGRP authors style ‘postmodern heterogeneity’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 3). In contrast, they seem much more comfortable with ‘collective or inherited (or traditional) narratives’ (2020a: 3 fn. 1), without regard to their potentially restricting or reactionary aspects (cf. Dunn 2014).

Deficiencies of the policy analysis

The IGRP volume is extraordinarily negative in its analysis of current Gaelic policy, repeatedly denouncing it as lacking ‘relevance’ and being ‘largely symbolic’ and ‘based on vague under-informed aspirations’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 442). Moreover, it is characterised as being systematically imbalanced in favour of L2 speakers and other beneficiaries of ‘middle-class advantage’ and ‘detrimental’ to language maintenance in island Gaelic communities by ‘diverting attention away’ from the challenges that they face (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul 2021: 180, 181, 185. 187). In the research digest summarising the book, the authors state their case even more baldly: ‘Current policy provision displays a general bias in favour of Gaelic learners and potential future secondary bilingual speakers at the expense of existing vernacular speakers and their communities’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020b: 16).

Yet the book says surprisingly little about the substance of current policy, so that a reader unfamiliar with the current policy strategies and infrastructure would be unable to evaluate the authors’ claims, including their greatly overstated assertion that support for island Gaelic communities is ‘almost non-existent’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 374). Most obviously, the authors essentially confine their discussion to the policy regime established by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, considered below. A great deal of Gaelic development activity, however, is not conducted within the ambit of the Act, including school and adult education, broadcasting and the work of the various Gaelic organisations. For example, very little is said about the recent work of Comunn na Gàidhlig, which is primarily responsible for community initiatives since the creation of Bòrd na Gàidhlig in 2003. Remarkably, there is almost no discussion of the role of Gaelic broadcasting, which is dismissively relegated to the category of ‘cultural performance’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 432). In terms of spend, this is by far the most important strand of policy provision. It entails a comprehensive news service and a significant platform for cultural representation; in practical terms, more than 120 people are now employed in the Gaelic broadcasting sector in the Western Isles.

This ‘erasure’ (a term much favoured by the authors) is particularly problematic in relation to the nature of Gaelic development initiatives within the geographical area studied. In the Western Isles there are approximately 18 Gaelic officers of various kinds, several of them employed by different types of community trusts, such as Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn. Comunn na Gàidhlig runs a number of local language initiatives across

Scotland, including several in the Western Isles; a serious analysis would examine their performance closely, building on previous research (Meriel Young Consulting 2018). These initiatives are not even mentioned, although Comunn na Gàidhlig's work was praised by some focus group participants (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 225). A reader without knowledge of the current situation would have no idea what was being referred to.

Even in its discussion of the Act, the IGRP book's presentation is very thin. The Act established a statutory Gaelic agency, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which is required to prepare a National Gaelic Language Plan every five years and empowered to require individual public authorities to prepare Gaelic language plans. The authors say very little about the content of the various National Plans and even less about the contents of the 60-odd organisational Gaelic plans, or about the statutory guidance to which public authorities are required to have regard in preparing their Gaelic plans. It is very difficult to see how having a national strategy commanded by statute is problematic. These omissions are particularly notable given that one of the key claims made by the authors is that insufficient policy attention has been given to Gaelic communities in the study area. Each national plan makes specific reference to such areas, and the statutory guidance contemplates that public authorities based in and serving such communities should over time institute fully bilingual service provision and a fully bilingual ethos (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007: 20-21). Unfortunately, statutory Gaelic language plans of such public authorities have generally fallen far short of this objective (Dunbar 2018), but it is important to distinguish between poor implementation of a policy and the design and objectives of the policy structure itself. We are of the view that the potential of the existing policy framework has not been fully exploited, and that Gaelic language plans, particularly of public authorities operating in the areas considered in the book and article, should be strengthened considerably.

The authors place great reliance on the perceived 'irrelevance' of current policy, but the evidentiary basis for this conclusion is surprisingly thin. The IGRP team organised 13 community consultation meetings as part of the project but these attracted only 75 participants in all, fewer than six people per meeting (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 273).⁶ The authors quote a few participants who expressed concerns about the nature of current policy,

⁶ Another 18 people made written submissions. It is notable that more people (62) attended the Skye and Raasay meeting than all the meetings in the Western Isles combined. 93% of the population of Skye and Raasay live outside the IGRP study area.

but it is impossible to be clear to what extent these views were representative of the participant groups, let alone the wider population of the study area (as there was no effort to ensure that the discussion groups were representative in terms of demographic factors). The disappointing turnout at the meetings points up an important challenge for Gaelic language development in the islands: the relatively low level of public mobilisation in relation to the language. Most obviously, there has been little organised demand for strengthened GME, much in contrast to the dynamics in urban areas such as Edinburgh and Glasgow.

It is certainly arguable that the language plans developed by national bodies and local authorities are unduly weak, but the most striking problem is the weakness of the plans adopted by key public bodies operating in areas of high Gaelic density, notably Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES), the local authority for the Western Isles, and the Western Isles Health Board (Dunbar 2018). It is remarkable that the authors say so little about the policy role of CNES. The council is a democratic body whose policies in relation to Gaelic and other areas can be said to represent, imperfectly perhaps, the electorally demonstrated wishes of the local community, the majority of whom are Gaelic speakers. It developed a bilingual policy shortly after its creation in the mid-1970s and, as noted, under the statutory guidance on Gaelic language plans, it should be working towards developing a fully bilingual service provision and ethos. However, CNES has recently reported that although it had 1,300 employees with Gaelic language skills, only 167 were in posts in which Gaelic was an essential skill (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2021: 97). It is almost certain that the overwhelming majority of those will be Gaelic-medium teaching positions. The council has extensive powers in a wide range of fields, including most obviously education and social services, and it is also by far the largest employer in the islands. The fact that the council has not adopted, or more importantly been pushed by its constituents to adopt, more proactive and rigorous policies should be an obvious focus of policy critique. In addition, this would seem to be a worrisome indicator of the level of community engagement and the potential of a new Gaelic community trust (discussed below). However, the policy role of CNES or of any other important actors, including the regional social and economic development body Highlands and Islands Enterprise, is not considered.

Surprisingly, the authors challenge the relevance of the so-called ‘Catherine wheel’ model (Strubell 1998) to Gaelic in the Western Isles. This model posits a virtuous circle dynamic, in which increasing the supply of Gaelic goods and services leads to increased

demand for Gaelic goods and services and thus to increased production or delivery of Gaelic goods and services. In the IGRP book, the claim is made that the Western Isles has too low a Gaelic density for the functioning of Strubell's Catherine wheel model. This seems a strange claim when the majority of the population can speak the language. A more useful line of inquiry might consider how the model might reasonably function in urban areas of 1% Gaelic density; this will clearly involve a more niche or segmented dynamic.

Furthermore, the IGRP authors note that:

... the most common reasons for the teenagers who reported being supportive of Gaelic were associated with utilitarian reasons of the advantages of being bilingual and of Gaelic boosting employment opportunities [. . .], a response corresponding more with the instrumental and individual dimension of the civic promotion of Gaelic in Scottish culture than its communal function (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020: 432).

This, surely, is encouraging evidence of the potential of the 'Catherine wheel' model and in particular the potential of Gaelic-medium job creation to create positive attitudes towards the language. That the authors frame this in negative terms is remarkable.

The authors make repeated dismissive references to the ways in which Gaelic policy has worked to raise the symbolic or civic status of Gaelic, but they never specify what these initiatives involve or why such an outcome should not be considered valuable in sociolinguistic terms. Presumably they have in mind matters like bilingual signage on roads and public buildings or the use of Gaelic on organisational logos, emergency vehicles and so on. In this connection, it is important to engage with a long-standing argument concerning the reasons for language shift: that powerful institutions and discourses drummed home the message that Gaelic had no value, that opportunity and advancement required English. There is a broad consensus that this was an important factor in language shift. It is surely problematic to claim that when these institutions and discourses shift and become more favourable, that this is entirely irrelevant and meaningless.

Urras na Gàidhlig

The authors' central recommendation is the creation of a Gaelic community development trust, 'Urras na Gàidhlig'. The IGRP book offers a list of possible initiatives and programmes that the proposed Urras might organise and implement (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 436-39).

Some of these are promising and useful measures, albeit rather less than entirely original in conception, but there is no explanation of why these proposed activities could not be done as well or better by existing bodies (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, existing community trusts in the islands, the Iomairtean Gàidhlig or other existing Gaelic organisations). Furthermore, it is, of course, impossible to predict that any such trust would, in fact, undertake such activities, as opposed to other, less useful ones from a language revitalisation perspective. They do not effectively make the case for the new trust or explain what advantages it might bring that existing Gaelic bodies or community organisations do not.

More importantly, crucial questions such as the membership and structure of the proposed trust and, crucially, its relationship with existing mechanisms and with important actors based in the areas which were the focus of the research are not addressed. As noted above, repeated reference is made to the ‘Gaelic group’, the ‘Gaelic community’, the ‘Gaelic vernacular community’, and so forth, but none of these concepts is adequately defined. Would trust membership be limited to people whose first language is Gaelic? Would it include people who acquired Gaelic later in life? Would some degree of Gaelic ancestry be required? Would membership be restricted to people born in the study area? To those with a specified level of Gaelic fluency? To those with a demonstrated commitment to Gaelic revitalisation? If such criteria needed to be satisfied, who would design and carry out the necessary evaluations?

There is a similar lack of clarity as to how the trust would operate. The IGRP authors suggest that the trust would be ‘under the direct control of a representative cohort of community members’ (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020a: 425). It may be that this ‘representative cohort’ would be elected, but this is not made clear. How this ‘representative cohort’ would go about controlling the affairs of the trust is also not explained. Would the broader ‘community’ have any ongoing role in the operation of the trust and what controls would there be on the powers of the ‘representative cohort’? A ‘Representative Forum, which will function as a form of a Gaelic assembly’ is proposed (p. 428), but no details are given concerning its membership or operation.

Of particular importance is the question of the powers that such a trust would hold, and how the trust would relate to other important local organisations and institutions. These include local authorities, local health boards, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Caledonian MacBrayne, the Crofting Commission, and, of course, the Scottish Government.

As important, how would the trust relate to the many local community-based organisations which also play an important role in the life of such communities, including local land trusts, bodies such as Stòras Uibhist, cultural initiatives such as Ceòlas, local history societies and museums, sports organisations such as football clubs, social organisations of different kinds, the Feisean movement, and so forth? The authors say very little about how the trust would relate to any of these organisations and initiatives, nor do they offer any suggestions as to how such organisations might be regulated to support the language and its speakers.

In spite of the weakness of the implementation of the Gaelic language plan mechanism, that mechanism does offer ample opportunities to address wider policy challenges, unlike the trust proposal. In recent months, the deleterious impact on Gaelic and its speakers of trends in housing policy, and in particular the lack of availability of reasonably priced accommodation (and land), poor connectivity, unbalanced economic development (including overreliance on certain forms of tourism), and transport issues, have all been highlighted, but the authors do not engage with any of these issues in a meaningful way and, crucially, give no sense of how the proposed trust could have any impact on such issues. To do so would require considerable clarification of the powers which the trust could exercise in relation to the myriad other organisations active in the islands and the variety of policy issues involved, but no such clarification has been given. ‘Subsidiarity’ and ‘decentralisation’ are interesting concepts and undoubtedly have some rhetorical impact, but without any details, they have little practical value. A more productive alternative would be to significantly strengthen the mechanisms which we already have; mechanisms, we should recall, that were fought for over a long period of time by principled and committed leaders, the large majority of whom were themselves native speakers from island communities, usually supported by voluntary membership organisations which arose from various Gaelic communities throughout the country, the islands included.

Furthermore, how would such a trust change attitudes and behaviours? The authors are doubtful of the efficacy of Strubell’s ‘Catherine Wheel’ model and the sort of mechanisms contained in the current policy framework - a framework which is generally adopted in relevant international treaties such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and in most of the jurisdictions in Europe which have taken positive measures in support of minority languages such as Gaelic. However, these mechanisms are based on empirically testable theories of language revitalisation. We do not believe that the

potential of current Gaelic policy mechanisms have come close to being fully exploited. But as we discussed earlier, the authors themselves acknowledge that the sorts of utilitarian motivations which current mechanisms aim to enhance do seem to have had some positive effects on the attitudes and behaviours of young people. By contrast, it is not at all clear what theory of language revitalisation the trust recommendation is based on - what are the social processes which the trust would engage to create more positive attitudes to Gaelic and commitment to its greater use? And, crucially, has such a trust been employed in any other minority language context, and if so what benefits has it produced? The authors assume that a ‘culture of democracy and participation’ and ‘spirit of positivity’ would naturally emerge to take the Urras forward (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020: 426, 427), but this is surely optimistic.

In November and December 2020, a cross-party group of MSPs held a series of nine ‘community conversations’ to discuss the issues raised by the IGRP book in the Western Isles, Tiree, Skye and Raasay. Although the meetings were held online, only 126 people attended, only 53 of them at the seven meetings in the Western Isles. Given that the Gaelic-speaking population of the IGRP study area is 17,468, it is far from clear that the views expressed by the participants in these meetings are representative, but it is notable there was no consensus on the usefulness of the proposed Urras. In a report on the meetings, it was concluded that ‘[i]t is hard to determine whether there was a majority in favour of a new and independent language development trust’, and that ‘the majority did not comment on the specific point of the trust one way or the other’ (Allan and Crouse 2020: 8). Instead, the challenges highlighted by participants in those meetings included enhancing the language skills and opportunities of children and young people in Gaelic-medium education to use Gaelic in informal settings outside of the school, creating greater opportunities to use Gaelic in what are now English-dominant communities (p. 7), and the central challenge of increasing intergenerational transmission in the home. These are the same issues as those faced by the three quarters of Gaelic speakers who were not taken into account in the supposedly ‘comprehensive’ sociolinguistic survey. Other points noted by the participants, including the need for more public sector jobs in the island economy, and that Gaelic should be ‘an integral part policy [sic] of policy thinking in the management of housing, crofting, fishing and other sectors’, and that ‘[l]anguage planning should be integrated in a meaningful way into broader development issues’ (p.11), could all be addressed within the existing policy framework, and notably through stronger Gaelic language plans which better reflect the statutory guidance.

Conclusion

Researchers, policy-makers, and activists who are committed to the revitalisation of threatened languages such as Gaelic are required to engage in a very sensitive balancing act. They must highlight the very serious challenges faced by the language and its speakers, without creating a sense of despondency or provoking divisions and conflict within the broader speech community. They should be critical of weaknesses in current structures to support the language, but when presenting alternatives, those alternatives should be clear, detailed, and based on a coherent theory of language revitalisation. Where they make recommendations for particular interventions, they must demonstrate that such interventions cannot be accomplished through improvements to existing structures. As we have sought to demonstrate here, both the recent article in *Scottish Affairs* and the book on which it draws so heavily have in our view fallen well short of these objectives.

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