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### Tha staing na Gàidhlig air fàs nas miosa - the Gaelic language crisis has got worse

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## OPINION

# Gaelic badly let down, reform is now even more critical

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*Tha staing na Gàidhlig air fàs nas miosa* – the Gaelic language crisis has got worse.

The combination of a disingenuous official consultation about the challenging sociolinguistic evidence of the remaining Gaelic vernacular communities in the islands, and now the withdrawal of funding for Gaelic officers in these areas, demonstrates the reality of official concern for sustaining native-speaking communities.

It appears that the efforts to focus on prioritising the vernacular crisis have now been officially relegated to a non-issue in public bodies. Money speaks, and budgetary contractions indicate a clear contradiction between well-meaning official aspirations for Gaelic on the one hand and what can be achieved in practical, strategic terms with very limited financial supports on the other. The real terms reductions in Bòrd na Gàidhlig's budget over the last decade, explain, to a large extent, the emphasis on rhetorical engagement with Gaelic affairs, at the expense of meaningful strategic supports for actual communities.

The research by Soillse and the Language Sciences Institute of UHI clearly stated the challenges involved in maintaining a viable indigenous Gaelic-speaking community. Its evidence and analysis indicated the dangers inherent in failing to address the issues by continuing to pursue the same policies as if all was well.

A “nothing to see here” approach was initially adopted by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, aided and abetted by those in positions of authority and influence in forming and directing Gaelic development policies. An unwillingness to engage constructively with the language reality across all of Scotland, and to acknowledge the precarious social situation of Gaelic communities in the islands, has undermined the credibility of the official approach to Gaelic affairs in Scotland. The apparent avoidance by Scottish Ministers of the critical social situation of Gaelic speakers has resulted in an even deeper crisis. The Gaelic communities have probably never felt



Cynical cuts to Gaelic communities funding reveal lack of commitment to the language. (Pic: Murdo MacLeod)

more distant for the public bodies which were nominally established to support them.

Significant change to the overall structure of Gaelic development is required, and this reform process should clearly acknowledge the reality of the situation in communities and identify suitable resources to address this reality. The degree of ineptness in the management of public policy towards safeguarding Gaelic as a “language for all Scotland” is staggering to behold, even to the casual observer of such matters.

Currently, there is a draft Scottish Languages Bill going through a parliamentary consultative process, entailing several potentially far-reaching new burdens to be placed on public authorities in relation to Gaelic development. As the financial memorandum to the Bill makes clear, no additional funding will be made available to support legislative implementation, implying that many of these new proposals are unlikely to be enacted. Suggested legislative reform with no expectation of implementation will serve as another distraction from the real issues that need to be addressed. In this sense, it amounts to legislative pretence and serves no identifiable purpose. The Bill as currently proposed is actually an impediment to progress and gives no clear

advantage to the required community-level supports for Gaelic speakers and learners, whether they be in Edinburgh or Eoligarry.

The recent withdrawal by the Scottish Government of funding for the network of Gaelic community development officers puts Gaelic development into an even more precarious position. Adding insult to injury, in many cases it marks another reduction in public funds in these already marginal communities. Whether the organisations and individuals managing this network made a sufficiently robust case for continuation of funding is unclear at this stage.

Similarly, we do not know if they simply acquiesced to Scottish Government officials' budgetary reduction and if they agreed that grassroots Gaelic community development was no longer the key strategic intervention required to safeguard the future of the language. In any event, the funding decisions associated with the draft Languages Bill and the withdrawal of funding for the network of community officers signals a high-handed approach to the Gaelic situation and a lack of official interest or political desire in providing adequate support.

The economic and cultural contribution of Gaelic speakers and learners to Scot-

tish life seems to have no value, according to the Scottish Government. In this context, one wonders if the draft Scottish Languages Bill is a cynical manoeuvre to claim that SNP manifesto commitments are somehow honoured, but with little or no expectation of actual policy reform or practical activity to follow from the legislation.

At first glance, the current impasse over funding for Gaelic community officers would appear to be an ideological decision, cynically taken by Scottish Government Ministers, rather than purely a budgetary issue. For an external, neutral observer to such matters, it is difficult to understand as to how around £300,000 is not available to support Gaelic community development officers from within the £60 billion budget agreed last week by the Scottish Parliament.

However, if additional funding is not available, maybe Bòrd na Gàidhlig and others need to look at the current funding regime and the development priorities managed by the Bòrd. The last annual report published by the Bòrd indicated nearly £2 million of a funding allocation to Gaelic organisations with around £700,000 spent on activities in the support of the language plans of public bodies. Maybe one of the answers to the “funding crisis” is re-priori-

tise developmental activities towards more structured and funded community work, and reduce the emphasis placed on the often-symbolic language plans of public organisations as a panacea for the social survival of Gaelic.

As the Scottish Languages Bill will be the focus of debate to consider further amendments to the proposed changes to the 2005 Gaelic Act, this current opportunity should also be taken to review the structure of the Bòrd, as promised in the SNP manifesto. This has not happened to the extent expected. It has become increasingly clear that Bòrd na Gàidhlig has become all things to all people with an all-encompassing brief, which is not fair on the Bòrd nor on the Gaelic community.

Much positive work has happened since 2005, but now would be a good time to review current structures and areas of responsibility. In times of crisis, a change of strategic direction is normally the way to forge a new pathway to improved outcomes.

The Languages Bill offers the opportunity to re-examine the role of Bòrd so that it can be focused entirely on the strategic management of Gaelic development activity in communities. This review process could also consider whether areas of “regulation” as these relate to the language plans of public bodies could

be subsumed within relevant departments of the Scottish Government. The Bill, as it stands, is merely sufficient to support Gaelic as a school language and to provide for sectoral funding to public bodies promoting Gaelic arts and heritage. In short, it expresses a vision for promoting Gaelic in publicly funded institutions rather than in society.

The new Bill also proposes “areas of linguistic significance”. This is another opportunity to refocus Gaelic community development activity. Although the current definitions set out in the Bill need to be streamlined and refocused, two category areas of intervention could be considered: (a) all the Hebrides and substantial areas of the western seaboard of the Highlands and Islands should be classed as “areas of linguistic and cultural significance”; and (b) another category identified to support learners and speakers of Gaelic across the rest of Scotland.

A newly established public body or a significantly reformed Bòrd could have primary responsibility for strategic development within area (a) and in relation to (b), it should be possible to re-establish and properly fund and resource an organisation like Comunn Luchd Ionnsachaidh na Gàidhlig. Existing Gaelic organisations would provide services to support such a strategic structure.

The current debate on the removal of community-based funding should focus minds on where the real priorities lie, but for any meaningful change to happen there needs to be a willingness on the part of Scottish Government Ministers and senior leaders within the current suite of Gaelic organisations to initiate a process of organisational transformation and to create the democratic environment in which Gaelic communities across Scotland will be strengthened.

It is time that those with official responsibility for Gaelic affairs to demonstrate a clear vision, a sense of leadership and a capacity for innovation to make Gaelic development a meaningful aspect and a credible part of public and social life in Scotland. ■ (Iain Caimbeul is a senior research fellow in the Languages Sciences Institute UHI)