

### Culture in Crisis – The death of Gaelic

The recent controversy about cutting funding for Scottish Opera has given the impression that culture in Scotland is in crisis, but as recently pointed out in the Scotsman, Scotland spends over £250 million on arts per year. This considerable sum comes from a variety of sources such as £43 million from the Scottish Arts Council which is due to increase, £42 million from Historic Scotland and £63 million for National Galleries, Museums and Libraries. Included in the overall arts spending is £19 million on Gaelic or 7.6% of the total.

The accompanying graph is taken from the Censuses for the past 150 years, and if the present trend continues Gaelic will be a dead language before the end of this century. The death of a spoken language is like a species becoming extinct. It is lost forever, to be preserved in books like a stuffed specimen. There are many countries which can ensure the future of opera ~~much~~ better than Scotland, but only Scotland can ensure the future of the Gaelic language with its wealth of literature and music, which provide the cultural background to so much of Scotland, from place names to poetry.

This is not to say that nothing is being done. A Gaelic Language Bill was introduced last month, and a Gaelic Development Agency has been established in Inverness as recommended in the 2002 report "A fresh start for Gaelic". This report noted that we are only creating some 250 new Gaelic speakers per year while some 1,500 of the older generation die annually, and again "The scale of the crisis confronting the language is best appreciated when we realise that the current number of about 2,000 children in Gaelic medium, primary and secondary education needs to be increased five fold to maintain the present population of Gaelic speakers let alone reverse the decline".

One of the keys is broadcasting, because without dedicated radio and television channels in Gaelic as there are in Wales and Ireland, the language will inevitably decline. Gaelic media would also provide careers for a younger generation of Gaelic speakers, for whom there are few job opportunities to use the language at the moment, apart from teaching. It is essential that the Gaelic language is promoted within the statutory framework of UK broadcasting, which is still a reserved power to the Westminster Government. It is also essential that every effort is made to increase the supply of Gaelic teachers in schools.

Part from broadcasting, and the provision of teachers, there is one other initiative that is urgently needed. That is incentives for the older generation of Gaelic speakers to make their skills available to the next generation of learners. As Gaelic speakers die so their knowledge and language die with them. This resource is not being acknowledged. In Dumfries and Galloway there are about 500 Gaelic speakers. This has not been a Gaelic speaking area for 200 years, so apart from learners, these Gaelic speakers have moved into the area from outside and are mostly isolated with no opportunities for passing on the language.

The provision of proper Gaelic broadcasting, with financial incentives for teachers and Gaelic speakers to pass on their language, would cost money. But failure to act now will mean that future generations of Scots will look back on the first Scottish Parliament for 300 years and say that it failed in one of the most fundamental aspects of national identity, namely the support of that country's unique language. The cultural crisis in Scotland is not so much the reduction of funding for opera as the death of Gaelic.

# GENSUS DATA ON GAELIC SPEAKERS

- ◇ "habitual"
- ⊙ Gaelic only
- ⊕ Gaelic and English (including age under 3)
- + Gaelic and English (excluding age under 3)
- ▣ Includes reading and writing
- ▽ Estimate of fluent speakers

