

Peter Peacock MSP

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

15 April 2010

Gaelic (Action Plan)

Peter Peacock : Like other members, I very much welcome the action plan, which I regard as an attempt to bring more focus to the work of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the previously agreed national plan and to drive specific action to increase language acquisition more quickly than would otherwise be the case. I welcome all that. I know from comments that were made to me during my time as a minister with responsibility for Gaelic that Bòrd na Gàidhlig has not had an easy start in life, to put it mildly.

There were many key personnel changes at key moments—and the board is currently looking for a chief executive. Many people in the Gaelic community were frustrated with the progress that the board was able to make.

A criticism that I used to hear was that everything was a priority.

That is easy to understand, because when we are trying to save a language there is an awful lot to be done.

If the action plan is successful in providing a better focus for the board and its work, I will very much welcome that.

However, the action plan is pretty broad and contains a curious mix of outcomes that are highly specific and measurable and outcomes that are not at all specific or measurable.

In key respects it is highly ambitious.

That is not a bad thing. It is important to be ambitious for the language.

However, I wonder how realistic and achievable some of the targets are.

Having said that, given the broad intention that is expressed in the objectives, I very much wish the approach well.

An attempt to reverse the decline of a language presents a big challenge, but I remain more optimistic than ever about the prospects of success.

I will cover some of the ground that Ted Brocklebank covered, because I have been reflecting, in much the same way as he has been doing—that must be a feature of men of our age, although I am much younger than Ted, as members can see—on the past 25 years, during which time I have had some involvement in Gaelic development.

Twenty-five years ago, Gaelic development as a concept was in its infancy.

I well remember visiting the offices of An Comunn Gàidhealach in Church Street in Inverness, to talk to the officials about their work, which focused on the Mod but also supported adult learning programmes and a number of Gaelic societies across the Highlands and Islands and in Glasgow and other cities.

I remember the work that was done by Grampian Television and I pay due tribute to Ted Brocklebank for his important role in that.

The BBC, too, was responsible for some important Gaelic programming in those days, even if programmes sometimes went out very late at night or early in the morning.

I have watched—and helped a bit with—the growth of Gaelic-medium education.

I remember the scepticism about the issue in the early days, not least from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

I am glad that that has changed over the years.

I have watched Gaelic-medium education grow and grow; there are now more than 60 units.

I watched the start and growth of the Gaelic playgroup movement, which is to be encouraged.

The first secondary school, in Pauline McNeill's constituency in Glasgow, is a relatively recent and important development.

The first stand-alone primary schools are beginning to emerge.

Gaelic-medium education teacher numbers have grown and grown, although there remain challenges.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the member agree that one of the arguments for Gaelic-medium education is to do with the strength that bilingualism brings?

I think that that shows the progress that has been made in recent years, in which the member played a part when he was Minister for Education and Young People.

Peter Peacock: I absolutely agree with the minister.

Alasdair Allan is a good example of that.

Once someone has mastered one language, they can master many languages—it becomes much easier to do so.

That is a good thing in a modern European society, let alone in a wider, global society.

I have watched Sabhal Mòr Ostaig grow from that small, rather dilapidated barn into a campus that is superb by any standards, anywhere in the world.

I have helped a bit with that at various times, in various different roles, by providing the odd cheque—not a personal cheque, I must say, but a Government or council cheque.

Like Ted Brocklebank, I pay tribute to Sir Iain Noble for his work in that regard.

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is not just a further education college but a centre for a series of important activity around Gaelic. As Ted Brocklebank said, a whole area of Skye has been regenerated on the back of that work.

We have also seen various spin-offs from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, through Cànan, Tobar an Dualchais, and so on.

Lots of projects have spun out from that.

I have seen Comunn na Gàidhlig, Cli Gàidhlig and Comann nam Pàrant develop over the years.

Stòrlann Nàiseanta na Gàidhlig, which publishes books and other publications to support education and wider access to the language, has also been growing over the years.

There have been new forms of adult learning, and ulpan, to which Alasdair Allan referred, has been an important part of that. I should also mention the impact of Runrig in modernising pride in the language and the wider culture at a particularly important time.

The *West Highland Free Press* also takes the people, the land and the language as its theme.

I have watched the development of "Eòrpa", which is a fantastic programme about contemporary European affairs that is made in the medium of Gaelic.

In addition, the fèisean movement has had a huge impact on access to the language.

There are umpteen important arts projects in which Mike Russell took part at a much earlier time in the Uists, when he was much slimmer than he is today.

There is also MG Alba and the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which made Bòrd na Gàidhlig a statutory body with language plans.

There is a vibrancy about Gaelic development that we have never seen before, which is to be welcomed. All those institutions and organisations have a lot of capacity and exist

to address the decline in Gaelic that we all want to see addressed, and that is where my optimism comes from.

Part of the thinking behind making Bòrd na Gàidhlig a statutory body was the need to get all the resources marshalled and moving in the same direction, marching together, with the board providing some leadership for that. I hope very much that the new strategy will help to achieve that. If it does so, we can look forward to the number of new Gaelic speakers growing at a faster rate than the rate at which the indigenous language speakers are dying out. That is the crucial changeover that needs to take place.

I referred earlier to the ambitiousness of the targets in the report.

I will illustrate that briefly by reference to three things: teacher numbers, pupil numbers and the specific grant.

By any standards, achieving a 100 per cent increase in teacher numbers, year on year, is ambitious.

It is not the first time that we have had a recruitment initiative—I initiated one as well—and it will be a tough challenge to deliver that, especially as it appears that there are currently few vacancies in Gaelic-medium education in the system.

I checked websites about that through my office today.

Why would someone train as a Gaelic-medium teacher if there are no vacancies?

There are challenges in that, which I hope that ministers will address in order to improve the process.

Equally, although I agree with the objective of increasing pupil numbers by 15 per cent, that will not be easy to achieve in the short term unless we have the teachers.

The two things are obviously connected.

The target of increasing pupil numbers by 15 per cent is predicated, to some extent, on the Gaelic-specific grant being used to expand the provision.

It has always been the intention to use the Gaelic-specific grant to do that and some of it has helped with that, but a large part has gone into mainstream funding for Gaelic-medium education.

In the present financial climate, it will be very tough for councils to mainstream that funding and release the specific funding for new development.

I hope that the matter is handled sensitively but firmly so that progress can be made.

That said, I see progress being made on all those fronts.

I turn to something that Pauline McNeill touched on.

The text of the report—but not the specific targets that I could find—talks about the 80 per cent drop-off in Gaelic-medium education between primary and secondary school.

That is a crucial part of the development process that we must tackle.

It is a key issue.

Glasgow has the first Gaelic-medium secondary school and is showing how that can be done, but we need to move things forward. I am sorry that the report does not contain a specific target relating to how we can do that.

Reference is made to it, but it is an issue that we need to look at.

I wish the report well, although I have some reservations about the detail.

That is why I also support our amendment, which proposes to keep the available resources under review—that is all that we are asking.

I associate myself with what Ted Brocklebank said about New Zealand.

I had the opportunity to visit New Zealand when I was the Minister for Education and Young People, and I spent some time in looking at how Maori-medium education was being delivered.

I spoke to the New Zealand equivalent of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and was hugely impressed by what it was doing.

I remember speaking to Allan Campbell, who is sitting in the public gallery today, about that and trying to

ensure that the board learned lessons from New Zealand.

I also associate myself with what Ted Brocklebank said about confidence in the language making so much else happen in economic development and the regeneration of communities.

With that, I close my remarks, as I know that we are running short of time.

I welcome the report and hope that it will lead to progress in the spirit that I have suggested.