

Revival or Not ?¹

1. THE COURAGE TO DECIDE

The current series of Thomas Davis lectures, marking the 75th anniversary of the Gaelic League, are a reminder that the revival of Irish has been an issue in Irish life for at least threequarters of a century. For half a century, moreover, it has been the declared public policy of the Irish State. But the desired revival has not taken place and, as things are going, will not take place. After 75 years of costly and frustrating failure, it seems high time that we had the courage to decide, in a responsible manner, whether the revival is to be achieved or to be abandoned.

More precisely, it is time we decided whether we are willing to accept *the decision against revival* which is being made, willy nilly, by the shrinking of the Gaeltacht towards vanishing point. (Since the League was founded, the area, population and cultural quality of the Gaeltacht have diminished continually and drastically.)

Deciding to accept this decision would not mean banishing Irish from our lives; it would mean finding a new place for it in accordance with realisable aims. On the other hand, refusing to accept this decision would mean giving the revival of Irish urgent priority, in a quasi-revolutionary manner, as one of the chief purposes of public policy in the Republic. It would mean investing many millions of pounds and large human resources in a revival programme that was meant to succeed. The refusal to decide either way is a collective act of cowardice.

What is the present situation? The aim of the Irish language movement has never been revival in the strict sense of starting to use again a language that was dead. Rather has its aim been — at the very least — to give Irish something like the same place in Irish life as Flemish has in Belgian life. In other words, its minimum purpose has been to make Irish the vernacular of a representative segment of modern Irish life, which might expand in time.

The Gaeltacht, at the beginning of the century, did not constitute a representative segment or microcosm of modern Irish life. At the same time, it was the only part of Irish life (I speak of the several Gaeltachtaí as one) which had the makings of such a microcosm — the makings of a complete social and mental milieu, where Irish would be the vernacular. It had the essential ingredient: its vernacular was Irish.

The "obvious" course, then, would have been to build on this foundation by developing one or more of the major Gaeltacht regions into a representative segment of modern Irish life, capable of standing on its own feet along-

¹*Irish Times*, 21 January 1969 (Supplement for 50th anniversary of First Dáil).

side English-speaking Ireland. However, for a very good reason, which we shall return to later, this was not done.

As a result, we are today much further away than 70 years ago from achieving the minimum aim of the revival movement. Not only has the Gaeltacht diminished drastically in area and population: it has shrunk also in regard to "social spread." Many trades and occupations which were then represented within the Gaeltacht are no longer represented there.

Moreover, even in the largest surviving Gaeltacht area — that of West Galway — the restricted occupational groups which still use Irish, use it only for a portion of their daily life. Almost all dealings with doctors, lawyers, bus conductors, public officials, butchers, chemists, garages, engineers and building contractors are carried on in English. In some places, the same is true of dealings with grocers, priests and publicans. Finally, almost all reading (including prayer-books at Mass), normal television-viewing and cinema films are in English. Indeed, the very tombstones are usually inscribed in English.

As for the "Gaeltacht," not a single street, not a single pub or shop or café in Galway not to mention Dublin or any other city — has become *even predominantly* Irish-speaking during the past 50 years.

If present population trends and the present rate of language change continue, there will be no Gaeltacht at all — not even the present bilingual semi-Gaeltacht — in another 20 years. If these factors intensify the final demise will be swifter still. Then the last rational hope of establishing Irish as a contemporary vernacular will have disappeared.

The failure to gaelicise even a representative nucleus of Irish life is a failure to revive Irish in the only sense that matters. It is a failure to attain even the *minimum* aim of revival. Such being the case, we are now challenged to accept this as our *de facto* decision on the matter — or to react vigorously and effectively against it. To let matters slide is not merely cowardly: it is harmful for several reasons.

In the first place, it is demoralising for a people to be continually failing without hope of success — or effective desire for success — in an aim which they have set themselves. Such a situation is not only profoundly discouraging: it is productive of hypocrisy and mental befuddlement. Secondly, a great deal of public policy, especially in education, but by no means only there, is directed — in intent at least — towards the revival of Irish. By failing to change this, while at the same time failing to revive Irish, we are wasting resources and frustrating our youth in an irresponsible fashion.

Further, we are perhaps succeeding in making Irish so definitively hateful that we shall lose forever the opportunity of giving it a place in our schools, and in our national life generally, which would not be directed to revival, but towards a rational recognition of its role in our past history.