

2. THE ONE REMAINING CHANCE

I believe that there is one way and one way only in which the Irish revival can still be made to succeed. I believe that if we are not willing to adopt this course wholeheartedly, we should call off the revival now and commit ourselves one hundred per cent to English. We *can* have a great future in English, as we already have a far from dishonourable past in it.

I remarked above that we did not follow the "obvious" course — if we wanted revival — of building on the Gaeltacht foundations, and that we had not done this "for a very good reason." That "very good reason" was our predominant philosophy of life, then as now.

Its continuing predominance into the present is what has made the revival of Irish impossible. Since the scheme I am going to propose *inevitably* runs counter to that philosophy, it will be useful to take a look at it first. We shall then know why we have not revived Irish and how we can continue not reviving it, if we so choose.

If the people of the Gaeltacht, the language movement and the new Irish State had *effectively desired* to give Irish at least the rôle of Flemish, they would have taken the obvious course of building on the available Gaeltacht foundations. In fact, however, there was no such effective desire, either in the Gaeltacht or among the people of the 26 counties as a whole.

There was merely a vague wish, almost entirely confined to urban English-speakers; and this wish was rendered impotent by an older and really effective desire that had characterised Irish life (more specifically, Irish Catholic life) for nearly a century previously.

This was a desperate, overriding desire, both of individuals and of the collectivity, for *material power*, whether political or economic, and for the *status* which goes with such power today. Since these could be had more quickly and more easily by speaking English than by speaking Irish, and in cities rather than in the countryside, we could not seriously want to restore Irish, least of all in the rural Gaeltacht.

We could only wish sentimentally for an Irish revival, make guilt-ridden and uncoordinated gestures in that direction, and employ Irish as a shibboleth in our revolutionary state-building — much as Marxist-Leninist language was employed in Soviet Russia.

Even at that, I understate. For the mentality I describe (which still predominates) any serious idea of living in an Irish-speaking milieu day in day out — and hence of *creating* such a milieu — is traumatically abhorrent. Most of us feel that an Irish-speaking milieu is not only inferior to, but the very opposite of that "modern," "urban," "sophisticated," "enlightened" and "not-native-Irish" life that which we predominantly desire. Deep down, Irish is bound up in our feelings with that world of things "native," "narrow,"

“old,” “peasant” and “poor” which we have been struggling desperately to get out of.

We feel that a “native Irish” mentality and way of life betoken insecurity, insularity, intellectual impotence and lack of status in contemporary circumstances.

Since the Gaeltacht, with its small farmers and fishermen, was (is) that alarming world incarnate to an extreme degree, there could be no question of our wanting seriously to build on the Gaeltacht, or of our seeing any useful future for it.

This applied to language enthusiasts almost as much as to anyone else. Except for learning Irish, for summer holidays, and (a few of them) for occasional missions as do-gooders, they have avoided the Gaeltacht. Love of the language was a fine thing but it must not mean sacrificing big-city life, a well-pensioned job, a substantial income or the corridors of power and status. Let the Government save the Gaeltacht, and let the natives, but no one else, live there!

Finally, as it so happened, the Gaeltacht was on the opposite side of the country from England. For a mentality which saw England as power and status incarnate — as the living image of what we most keenly hungered for — that finally sealed the Gaeltacht’s fate. Even today, most of us still regard distance from England — in a geographico-economic sense or intellectually — as a black mark and as something to be avoided at all costs.

This unbalanced craving for power and status above all else was a normal enough reaction in a people so ground down and broken as we had been. Consider the case of the Germans after both World Wars, or of the Jews in Europe during the past century and a half. But however normal in the circumstances, our single-minded devotion, individually and collectively, to getting to the top made the revival of Irish a lost cause. Useless for our primary purpose, it had no hope against the accompanying self-hatred.

The case of the Jews offers instructive parallels. As growing numbers of them, leaving their ghettos, struck out for social and economic power, Yiddish gradually became a badge of inferiority and of the bad old life. The successful among them discarded it in favour of the major European language. It was not until Hebrew, by its association with the saga of Israel, acquired new status, that successful Jews were willing to speak “Jewish language” again.

In explaining the revival of Hebrew, too much has been made of the need of the diverse bodies of Jewish immigrants for a *lingua franca*. If that had been the overriding consideration, any one of several major world languages would have served just as well and would have seemed more advantageous and much less troublesome.

Obviously, it was a strong spiritual force that made archaic Hebrew the chosen language. Obviously, too, the spirit which made the desert fertile in

Israel, and swept Hebrew to new status, was a breakaway from the main Jewish stream upwards and westwards to the fleshpots of New York. Some few thousand who believed deeply sank their all, and revived their language, in their Promised Land.

Another "Israel" in Connemara and Cois Fharrige is the only chance now left to us of reviving Irish. The West Galway Gaeltacht is the largest remaining stretch of virtually continuous Gaeltacht. It contains 12,000 Irish speakers, of whom about 3,000 are children at school. If this goes, the other Gaeltachtaí will go, too, and the Irish revival movement will be a bodiless ghost, visible only at Celtic Congresses.

The first necessity for reviving Irish by developing the West Galway Gaeltacht is that the Government prepare a draft economic and social plan for the area based on several growth centres. The aim would be to create a prosperous region of towns, ports and open country which derived their wealth largely from manufacturing industry, fisheries, forestry, agriculture, horticulture and trade.

At the same time, a decision would be taken to hand over the execution of the plan, and wide powers of local government, to a West Galway Development Authority for the space of five years. Large sums would be earmarked from central funds, and steps would be taken to have a fund-collecting organisation established in Irish-America.

Now, as regards implementation, if this scheme were to go ahead *simply as a scheme of economic development*, it would *not* lead to the development of the West Galway Gaeltacht — and therefore not to the revival of Irish. It might develop West Galway, but it would result in the present semi-Gaeltacht becoming completely English-speaking, and that for two reasons.

First, the Galway Irish-speakers are by and large not "language enthusiasts." Like most people, they just happen to speak a language (in this case, Irish) because they grew up speaking it. But they would be, and are, quite willing to speak English, if circumstances seem to demand it.

Under the impact of the sort of development I have outlined, such circumstances would increasingly occur, if no thought had been given to preventing this. The Irish these people speak is, moreover, much less capable of dealing with a fully modern milieu than the language spoken by the better Irish-speakers in Dublin. And these native speakers have lost their linguistic creativity; when they encounter challenge, they take the easier course and use English.

Secondly, and directly linked with what I have said above, most of the official, executive and expert personnel who would come to work in the development scheme would be English-speakers, and would prefer to speak English. Moreover, most of them would decide to live in Galway city, not in the Gaeltacht. (As it is, for instance, most of the teachers at the

new all-Irish comprehensive school in Carraroe drive every day from Galway.)

These considerations bring us to the second necessity for success. While the Government is making its draft plan, and taking the related decisions, its experts compile a special draft report. This report would show the numbers of persons of all trades, professions and occupations who would be needed to come from outside to West Galway, *if the developing Gaeltacht area is to become quickly self-sufficient for its ordinary needs.*

The list would indicate the numbers of secretaries, hairdressers, butchers, chemists, lawyers, plumbers, managers, journalists, cinema-owners, café proprietors, cooks, technicians, doctors and so on who would be required for this purpose over a period of, say, five years. The facilities envisaged initially for the area as a whole should approximate to those of three average Irish towns of 7 - 8,000 population. (Allowances would be made for a small number of Gaeltacht persons who could be reliably expected to require the necessary skills quickly.)

Armed with this list of "wanted people," the Government declares a state of emergency in regard to the language: if Irish is to be revived at all, it says, the Galway Gaeltacht must be saved and made prosperous. It announces the outlines of its draft development plan and publishes the list of personnel needed from outside — perhaps 1,500 - 2,000 persons.

Finally, the Government makes the implication of the plan *conditional* on the requisite number of fluent Gaeilgeoirí, with adequate skills, pledging themselves to move to the Galway Gaeltacht when required, over the following five years. It is emphasised that these will not be cosseted people. Idealists are required who will take their chance professionally as every other way. But the trades-people and small businessmen are promised an embargo on any incursions into the Gaeltacht area by competitors from surrounding areas.

When the time-limit set for the receipt of pledges has expired, and the Gaeilgeoir volunteers have been interviewed and assessed, the Government announces the result. If the personnel needs have been adequately met, the scheme goes ahead. If not, then not, and the revival of Irish ceases to be public policy.

Suppose that the requisite number of suitable Gaeilgeoirí make a break with the prevailing mentality and pledge themselves. They begin to move west, giving leadership and inspiration in language matters, as in other matters, to the local people, while enriching their own speech from the native growth.

A central academy of the Irish language is established in the Gaeltacht and An Gúm moves west. A national daily newspaper, subsidised for the first five years, is published there. A radio station transmits RTE's second

radio programme (all in Irish) and serves as a local station. Three cinemas open their doors, all their films dubbed in Irish. A special Gaeltacht hospital goes up. Factories rise and the new towns grow. Rocks are blasted, townlands drained. Two hundred acres of glass spread out across the countryside. Inland fisheries are nationalised. The Development Authority can requisition building-land at will, leaving compensation and tangles over title-deeds to be settled legally afterwards. A general cargo port and a fisheries port infringe on the Atlantic.

Experimentation of all kinds begins, as Galway West becomes Ireland's laboratory. Elected parish councils pioneer new local government in preparation for the sixth year of the scheme, when an elected regional council takes over all non-technological functions from the Development Authority. Research on turf and bog development are centred in Galway West.

The country's leading marine biology station is already there. The increasing requirements of electric power are supplied by Ireland's first atomic energy plant. Preference in new jobs and in regard to residence permits is given strictly to Irish-speakers. But special schools, as in Israel, give crash courses in Irish to those desirable immigrants who have unusual qualifications, but who lack this essential requirement.

Co-operatives in agriculture, fisheries and industry become the rule rather than the exception. The Church plays its part by developing a liturgy of life and work, so that Connemara hymn tunes, production feasts and liturgical dances become the done thing in Ireland and abroad. This makes work for imaginative artists. All of life is there, in short, except a university. This rôle is fulfilled by Galway University, now adequately provided with Irish textbooks and generously endowed.

What I propose is not the quickest and easiest way to increase our material power or status, either as a State or as competing individuals. Primarily, it is a way to honour, integrity, high adventure and undying fame among men. It lies within the scope of our people's talents and of the material resources available to the seventeenth richest country in the world. It is neither the quickest nor the easiest way of becoming the sixteenth richest country.

But it would not make us poor; and it *could* lead to a profounder, more human kind of power and self-respect than we can ever achieve by increasing our G.N.P. and our personal incomes indefinitely, with no greater thought.