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The establishment of Scottish Parliament: What difference does it make for the Gaelic language?

1. Scottish Gaelic in a changing future

After the Labour government takeover in Westminster in 1997, followed by the referendum on establishing a Scottish Parliament, hopes for more support for the Gaelic language in Scotland were nourished. In the election campaign to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, all parties which were elected to Parliament had mentioned Gaelic, and all parties except the Conservatives had promised an increase in support for Gaelic (cf. Scottish parties' election manifestoes, obtainable from the parties or via their web sites). Now that the new Scottish Executive, formed by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, has been in power for some time, it is interesting to see if these hopes have been fulfilled. The two core questions of this paper will thus be:

1. What is the status of Scottish Gaelic after the devolution process?
2. What difference does the existence of the Scottish Parliament make for the status of Gaelic?

It is important to note that this paper refers to language status and Gaelic's position from a mere language policy perspective. The results are mostly based on an analysis of Parliament documents, the method of investigation being strictly philological. Empirical research has not yet been undertaken.

The reference time of my paper will be the first year of Scottish Parliament and the new executive. Even though this is an arbitrary time break, the first year is a symbolic point of time. As the first legislation period as a possibly more natural reference point is not over yet, this choice seems legitimate.

In the following, I will first give an introduction into the situation of Scottish Gaelic before devolution before presenting policies and initiatives launched by the new administration. Finally, I will attempt a comparison of the situation before and after devolution, and an evaluation of the measures taken in order to suggest an answer to my core questions.

2. The Situation of Scottish Gaelic before Devolution

2.1. Demographic Facts

Let me start by recalling some of the basic facts of the situation of Scottish Gaelic. Scottish Gaelic belongs to the Celtic language family and, like its sister languages, it has experienced a strong decline during the past centuries. The 1991 census showed that there were about 66,000 speakers left, and it is expected that the results of the 2001 census will show that this number has decreased even further. In the traditional heart land of the language, the *Gàidhealtachd*, there are still areas where more than 75% of the population mastered the language. Here Gaelic is still widely used, e.g.

for religious purposes. At the same time, these rural areas have seen the notorious migration of its population to the cities, which means that, of the absolute number of Gaelic speakers, about 40% live in other parts of Scotland such as Glasgow and Edinburgh. This change in demographic pattern of Gaelic use has led to new challenges for Gaelic support and revitalisation efforts. These figures indicate that if Gaelic is to continue playing a role within Scottish society, new ways of support will be necessary (MacKinnon 1993/1998).

2.2. Symbolic and Practical Aspects of Gaelic Policy before Devolution

Let us now come to the symbolic and practical policy issues that will be the basis for the policy change analysis. Table 1 lists symbolic aspects of Gaelic presence before devolution:

Table 1: Symbolic presence of Gaelic in Scotland

Symbolic presence of Gaelic in Scotland
Bilingual Road Signs in the <i>Gàidhealtachd</i>
Renaming of the Western Isles Council into <i>Comhairle nan Eilean Siar</i>

As the table shows, symbolic presence of the language was limited to very few, though important, core issues.

Table 2: Minority language domains in Scotland

Domain	Scotland before Devolution
Administration	Territoriality Principle on the Western Isles (since 1975 bilingual administration), very limited possibility to use Gaelic elsewhere
Court	No possibility of speaking Gaelic in court
Education	Wide-spread on the Western Isles and as Second Language, very limited elsewhere, no guarantees. Legal basis: 1986 Gaelic Language Education (Scotland) Regulations
Culture/Heritage	No restrictions; limited state funding (1985 National Heritage (Scotland) Act)
Media	No restrictions; limited state funding (1990/1996 Broadcasting Acts)
International Relations	Strictly speaking not applicable; co-operation with other Celtic countries not restricted
Further Demands	Co-operation between State and Gaelic speakers, but no Gaelic-only decision-making competence; no secure general legal framework recognising Gaelic as official language

The presence of Gaelic before devolution was slightly better if we look at practical issues of language use. Table 2 includes the most common domains of language use (cf. Blumenwitz 1996, 164-180). A short note seems necessary concerning the *International Relations* and so-called *Further Demands* categories: The former refers to cooperation of a language group with groups of the same language in other countries. The category which I have vaguely called *Further Demands* includes aspects of minority language

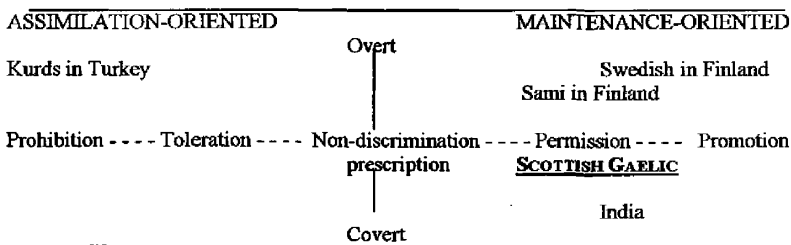
policy that go beyond just one domain. For instance, there are demands by Gaelic activists that Gaelic decision-making should be dealt with autonomously by Gaelic representatives only (cf. Dunbar 2000). Further, the most prominent demand of Gaelic activists refers to the establishment of a secure general legal framework for the Gaelic language: A specific Gaelic bill should provide some kind of official status for the language (cf. www.cnag.org.uk). This is clearly a question of language status which goes beyond the mere use of Gaelic in one or several of the language domains.

Where there is a certain degree of Gaelic presence, it is mostly due to increased awareness of Gaelic during the past decades. This is shown by the fact that most laws dealing with the language date from the past 20 years. All in all, however, support for the Gaelic language, though increased during past decades, remains rather arbitrary and dependent upon individual initiatives. It is thus not surprising that MacKinnon (1998, 194) summarises the situation of the Gaelic language as follows:

“Some definition of national policy for Gaelic in Scotland is very long overdue. Even its legal status is very much a moot point. There is no one single authority, forum or public watchdog for the interests of the language, its culture and its speakers”.

Given this moderate position of the Gaelic language, it is interesting to see how the situation of Gaelic can be placed into a framework of minority language situations. Even if doing so leads to a strong simplification of individual cases, such a comparison may help to evaluate one language’s situation and provide orientation for progress.

Figure 1: Scottish Gaelic in the Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson model



One prominent effort to provide such a framework is the model by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995, 80). On the horizontal axis of this two-dimensional model we find the classical assimilation vs. maintenance attitude of a state to its minorities, ranging from prohibition (e.g. Kurdish in Turkey until recently) to promotion (e.g. Swedish in Finland). The vertical axis refers to the way this policy is carried out: An overt policy is a policy

explicitly stated as such, whereas a covert policy implies measures taken by a state indirectly, without regarding language to be a separate policy field.

Given the support of Scottish Gaelic in the years before devolution, it seems reasonable to place the language in the permission category: There are regulations where the role of the language in certain domains is recognised by the state (education, media). But there are no coherent maintenance efforts which would justify a placement in the promotion category.

At the same time, the given situation calls for an average placement on the overt vs. covert scale. To a certain degree, Gaelic has been included in legal documents such as bills. However, Gaelic support usually takes place rather through individual initiatives and funding than a consistent well-defined policy. Therefore the average position seems appropriate.

3 The situation of Scottish Gaelic after Devolution

3.1. Steps taken on Gaelic issues by the new Scottish Executive

Bearing in mind the situation of Scottish Gaelic, it is now time to look at steps taken by the new executive and Scottish Parliament on language policy issues. An important milestone was the first debate in Scottish Gaelic in a parliament in modern times on March 2nd, 2000. This debate followed an agreement that every member has a right to use Gaelic in parliament and was celebrated as a highly symbolic event for the representation of Gaelic speakers in Scotland's highest democratic body. The debate centred around a motion introduced by the Deputy Minister for Gaelic, Labour MSP (Member of Scottish Parliament) Alasdair Morrison:

"The Parliament welcomes the Scottish Executive's programme of action in support of the Gaelic language, in particular its support for Gaelic-medium education; recognises the cultural, economic and social contribution of Gaelic to Scotland; supports the Scottish Executive's participation in the Columba Initiative to strengthen the links between the Gaelic-speaking communities of Scotland and of Ireland, and commends the work of local authorities, schools, colleges, universities and voluntary bodies in making available Gaelic-medium education at all levels from pre-school to tertiary and continuing education and in promoting the Gaelic arts". (http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/official_report/session-00/or050401.htm, col. 432)

The motion was unanimously supported by all Parliament members, and in the debate all speakers showed that they accepted Gaelic as a distinct part of Scottish identity. The only major disagreement within the debate was the evaluation of the Gaelic policy by the Conservative government before devolution, which the Tory MSPs presented in a more positive light.

Bearing in mind the Scottish Executive's programme, let us now look at the steps taken. Table 3 lists the 23 events of the first year of Scottish Parliament's (including its sub committees) and the Scottish Executive's work in which Gaelic was dealt with:

Table 3: Gaelic in the first year of Scottish Parliament work (cf. Scottish Parliament's and Scottish Executive's web sites)

Date	Domain	Event
1999 0806	General policy, Symbolism	Morrison at the CnaG Comhdhail (Gaelic Development Agency summit): 4 key issues of Gaelic policy
0610	Symbolism	Highland Council to erect bilingual road signs
0810	Culture, General pol., Symbolism	Morrison at the Royal National Mod Festival: the first Gaelic speech of a government minister
2010	Education, Use in Parliament	Enterprise and Lifelong Learning committee meeting on Gaelic issues in Gaelic
0311	Parl./Admin. Use, Legal Status	Agreement to appoint Gaelic Officer for Parliament
1611	Use in Parliament	Procedure's Committee meeting on the use of Scots in the Oath of Allegiance
1412	General policy	Morrison Gaelic policy study visit in Ireland
1412	Use in Parliament	Procedures Committee meeting on the use of Gaelic in motions
1612	Legal Status, General policy	Announcement of Gaelic Task Force
2000 0402	Use in Parliament	Announcement of Gaelic parliamentary and legal dictionary
0702	Education	Increased funding of Gaelic teacher training announced after Deputy Minister for Education and Children's visit to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Gaelic College)
2902	Use in Parliament	Procedures Committee meeting to prepare Gaelic debate
0203	General Policy, Symbolism	First Gaelic debate in a parliament in modern times
0703	Education	Education, Culture and Sport Committee meeting on Gaelic parents' organisation petition
0903	Parl./Admin. Use	Publishing of recruitment adverts for Gaelic Officer
1603	Education, Internat. co-op.	Opening of Gaelic Youth Parliament in Northern Ireland as part of the Columba Initiative
1703	Culture, Internat. co-operation	Opening of Gaelic Youth Theatre as part of the Columba Initiative
2703	Education	Increased funding of University of the Highlands and Islands announced by First Minister
2803	Culture	Increased funding for Royal National Mod (Festival) announced
0304	Education	First Gaelic-medium-only Primary School in Glasgow opened
0205	Education	Education, Culture and Sport Committee meeting in Gaelic with Gaelic activists on the place of Gaelic in the Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Bill
2305	Education	Educ., Cult. & Sport Committ. meeting on Celtic League petition
2106	General policy	First meeting of cross-party Gaelic group

First, the mere number of occasions shows that Gaelic indeed seems to play a constant role in the Scottish Parliament's agenda. The events involved are of very different importance, ranking from long term impact, such as the establishment of a Gaelic Task Force or the appointment of a Gaelic officer to rather small, but often symbolic actions, such as the increased funding of

the *National Mod* Festival. However, as a whole, it is noteworthy that Gaelic is constantly dealt with in various fields.

In the following, events as they have taken place are placed in juxtaposition to the situation of Gaelic as described above.

3.2. Changes in Status: Symbolic Issues

Let us first come back to the symbolic presence of Scottish Gaelic, this being important rather for aspects of identity of Gaelic speakers and the every-day recognition of the language's existence.

Table 4: Symbolic presence of Gaelic after one year of Scottish Parliament (cf. Scottish Parliament's web sites)

Symbolic presence of Gaelic in Scotland	
Before	Bilingual Road Signs in the Gàidhealtachd
Devolution	Renaming of the Western Isles Council into Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
After one	Complete bilingual signage in Parliament
Year of	Communication with Parliament possible in Gaelic
Scot. Parl.	Gaelic used in Parliament debates and committee meetings

Table 4 shows that in the work of Scottish Parliament itself, the task of officially representing the Gaelic speaking population is taken seriously. By this, the highest body of political representation in Scotland is willing to give Gaelic speakers their place in society. More generally, the increase of bilingual road signage shows more Gaelic presence also outside Parliament.

3.3. Changes in Status: Practical Issues

More crucial when documenting the impact of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament are, however, the practical policy changes in the different domains of language use. Table 5 compares changes in Gaelic policy after one year of the Parliament to the situation before devolution:

The table shows that policy changes vary strongly from domain to domain. At the one extreme, the use of Gaelic in Court still remains virtually impossible. Some domains have seen a certain degree of improvement, often where Gaelic had been relatively strong before devolution and where existing policies have only been extended (Culture/Heritage, Media, International Relations). There are, however, also parts of the policy where a strong improvement has taken place. This is mainly the case in the sections of language status, administration and education, the latter being officially designated as the prime target of Gaelic policy. However, it is important to note that hopes to see further demands fulfilled have not been satisfied.

Table 5: Minority language domains after one year of Scottish Parliament

Domain	Scotland before Devolution	Scotland after the first Parliament year
Admini- stration	Territoriality Principle on the Western Isles (since 1975 bilingual administration), very limited possibility to use Gaelic elsewhere	Legal Status: ideas to establish Gaelic as second official Scottish language with official status to unclear degree in a specific Gaelic Bill based on the <i>Secure Status</i> document. Use of Gaelic in administration expanded; more than symbolic presence in Parliament (Gaelic Officer); appointment of Gaelic committee establishes more co-operation between administration and Gaelic community
Court	No possibility of speaking Gaelic in court	No changes
Educa- tion	Wide-spread on the Western Isles and as Second Language, very limited elsewhere, no guarantees. Legal basis: 1986 Regulations	Primary policy domain of the government; ideas to include concrete guarantees for Gaelic in the proposed <i>Standard of Scotland's Schools Bill</i> ; important step forward in co-operation with Gaelic organisations
Culture/ Heritage	No restrictions; limited state funding (1985 Act)	Increased funding, symbolic presence of ministers at Gaelic events
Media	No restrictions; ltd. funding (1990/1996 Broadcast. Acts)	Slightly increased funding and attention
Internat. Relations	Co-operation with other Celtic countries not restricted	More direct co-operation between Scotland and Ireland
Further Demands	Co-operation between State and Gaelic speakers, but no Gaelic-only decision-making; Secure legal framework	More direct influence of Gaelic speakers in their affairs due to close co-operation of the government with Gaelic activists; however: autonomy is no issue

4. Results

In order to draw conclusions from the data presented, let us first recall the two connected questions underlying the research: What is the status of Scottish Gaelic after devolution? What difference does the existence of the Scottish Parliament make for the status of Gaelic?

In the following, the results will be subdivided into aspects concerning the impact of Gaelic on Scottish identity followed by positive and negative policy aspects. Finally, I will try a new evaluation of the Gaelic language policy in Scotland in the Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson scheme.

4.1. Impacts on Identity

Impacts on identity are widely connected to symbolic aspects of language use. Given the amount of attention Gaelic receives by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive, we find that Gaelic does play an important role in the creation of Scottish identity. Scottish Gaelic is widely present in the Scottish Parliament, which apparently considers Gaelic to be an important part of Scottishness. The achievement of the present state is thus an important step forward in the position of Gaelic in Scotland. Gaelic

seems to be widely accepted as part of Scottish identity, even among the vast majority of Scots who do not speak it. Summarising, Gaelic is thus still close enough to many people to be revitalised again. However, even if Gaelic is widely accepted so that all major political groups agree on its importance, this does not necessarily stop the decline of the language.

4.2. Policy Aspects

Summarising the impression of the role a Gaelic policy plays for the new government, we can thus draw the following conclusions. Positive and negative results will be listed separately, beginning with the positive side:

- ◆ Gaelic is a constant part of the agenda of the new administration; by introducing the post of Deputy Minister for Gaelic it has established a policy that supports Gaelic to a degree formerly unknown in the UK.
- ◆ The Scottish government's attention towards Gaelic and the steps taken have improved the situation of Gaelic in almost all domains, even if in many cases there has only been an expansion of previous policies.
- ◆ Stress on education nourishes hopes for increased revitalisation.
- ◆ Proposals regarding a Gaelic Bill may provide a legal framework.
- ◆ Scotland as a nation has become much more aware of its Gaelic heritage. Symbolic presence of the language supports this awareness.
- ◆ In Parliament itself, the presence of Gaelic enables Gaelic speakers to see themselves represented at the highest level of politics in democracy.
- ◆ While the situation of Gaelic before devolution had already improved over the past decades, it has now been upgraded to come closer to having an official, secure status.

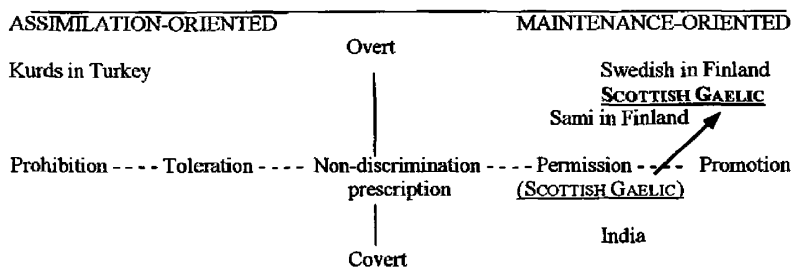
On the other hand, even if a different future for Gaelic language policy in Scotland may already have begun, this future is far from being perfect:

- ◆ The decline of Gaelic has not been stopped.
- ◆ In many domains (e.g. media, culture/heritage) there has been an expansion of previous policy efforts – but they may be taken back at any time as long as there is no officially recognised secure status.
- ◆ The Secure Status as the core demand of Gaelic activists has only been under discussion so far, without any concrete steps taken.
- ◆ Further demands, in particular autonomy ideas, have not been fulfilled.
- ◆ Beyond language status and policy, the practical danger of long-term death of the language prevails.
- ◆ All in all, the initiatives are an important step forward, but it remains to be seen in the future what the impacts of the new policy will be.

4.3. Scottish Gaelic in the Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson model

Let us now finally return to the Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson model. Given the results of the policy analysis, it seems legitimate to move the position of Scottish Gaelic in the scheme:

Figure 2: Gaelic in the Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson model after devolution



By promoting an active policy of maintenance and revitalisation, Scottish Gaelic seems to have moved from the permission to the promotion category. This does not mean that further improvements are not possible, particularly concerning the legal status. Much depends also on whether the promising initiatives will be carried out as planned. However, the language does receive enough active support to justify the placement in the promotion category. At the same time, Gaelic policy has become a separate field of political activity in its own right: If Gaelic had previously been dealt with separately in the different domains, e.g. concerning the separate approaches to more Gaelic presence in the media, there is now an open policy in which Gaelic is treated as an entity. Therefore the average score on the covert vs. overt axis improves to a considerably higher degree of an overt policy.

The application of the model thus presents a possible way of attempting to answer the initial questions of the paper: The results show that the existence of Scottish Parliament does in fact make a difference for Scottish Gaelic policy. Gaelic policy as part of the political agenda has improved considerably. It remains to be seen in the next years if the encouraging beginning of the new era will lead to a real policy change.

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Major Web Sites (including various sub sites):

- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar/Western Isles Council: <http://www.w-isles.gov.uk>
- Comunn na Gàidhlig/Scotland's Gaelic Development Agency: <http://www.cnag.org.uk>
- The Scottish Executive: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk>
- Scottish Parliament: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk>