



SPEAKERS: President Michael D Higgins is an Irish-language scholar. His predecessor Mary McAleese learned to speak Irish after taking office

We need a step-change in attitudes towards Irish language

PRESIDENT Michael D Higgins is an Irish language scholar. He is a great advocate and ambassador for the language using it as naturally as he uses English.

Former president Mary McAleese learned to speak Irish after she was elected president. When I was in Glenn Cholm Cille Gaeltacht a number of years ago learning Irish, there were photos of the former president in the foyer of the college having fun learning Irish. The teachers at the college spoke highly of Mary McAleese's commitment to learning the language. She attended classes annually at the college and is now a fluent speaker.

When the former Irish government education minister Joe McHugh was appointed, he was criticised for not speaking Irish. He learned it. I heard him speaking Irish in the Dáil and his fluency was impressive; as was his story about learning Irish and how it introduced him to not only the history of the language but Ireland's history and English colonialism and its failure to eradicate the Irish language.

When Gerry Adams was MP for West Belfast he wrote about the strength of the Irish language in the constituency. He said you could live your life to the full through Irish, such are the services available in Irish for the people of the area.

In the heart of loyalist east Belfast, on the main Newtownards Road, in the Skainos Centre, Linda Ervine teaches Irish to a group of people from a unionist background. The ethos of the classes is that the Irish language is not a threat to the British-Unionist identity of the learners. And it is not.

In an assessment of the usage of the language Conradh na Gaeilge estimated that 1.5 million people across Ireland speak it confidently daily.

Jim GIBNEY



Among those language activists and educationalist dedicated to the revival and development of the language there is a strong view that the language is more popular today than at any time in the past century.

And the growth is reflected in the Irish Medium Education, IME, sector. This paper reported in March this year that the number of children in full-time immersion education in the north had exceeded 7,000 for the first time since the sector's inception. There are currently 94 settings providing IMEs from pre-schools to secondary level across the north.

There is a similar story of decline reversal in the south – figures from the Department of Education show that 65,000 children in 577 settings are in receipt of IME; these figures include pupils in the Gaeltacht areas.

This remarkable and solid foundation now requires a response in kind from both the Dublin and Belfast-based governments and

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the state apparatus to move the language onto a new plane to see its fortunes set irreversibly on a forward path.

A significant step-change is needed in the attitude of both governments and especially the education ministers and departments.

IME has never been on a fair playing field with English-speaking schools, south and north. It needs to be. The Irish Language Act in the north should be speedily implemented in full and the DUP should lift its block on this happening. The promise made by the Irish government, in its programme for government when it came into office a year ago, that it was committed to a comprehensive policy for IME, from pre-school to secondary level needs to be honoured and implemented now.

But IME is only one sector of the state, although a crucial one, in responding to the popular demand for services for Irish speakers.

There is a legal and moral obligation on all areas of the state to provide services in Irish whether it is the police, the courts or the civil service.

The Irish language bill which is currently making its way through the Oireachtas, the Dáil and Seanad, seeks to identify and legally compel all sectors of the state to treat Irish speakers with the same respect that English speakers enjoy.

The process of its passage has been unacceptably slow and arduous.

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There is an abundance of evidence nationally and internationally demonstrating the benefits of a multi-lingual society – the basis of that here is English and Irish being jointly respected and supported.

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 19 1971

St Matthew's Attacked

SEVERAL abortive attempts were made by Protestant extremist mobs last night to set fire to St Matthew's Catholic Church, Newtownards Road, Belfast and as petrol bombs rained down on soldiers surrounding the area, four were set on fire and afterwards treated in hospital for burns. Three explosions were reported in the vicinity late last night – one in Templemore Avenue and another at Willowfield Street, but there were no reports of serious damage.

Earlier in the evening, Protestant mobs invaded the Catholic 'pocket' on the Newtownards Road behind the church when a Junior Orange parade passed on its way back from Carrickfergus and shots fired from one group struck a man and boy in another crowd. St Matthew's congregation numbers about 3,500 in an area of between 60,000 and 80,000 non-Catholics. It suffered several attacks in the 1920s and in one attack the nearby convent was set on fire.

The trouble broke out around 6 p.m. as the Junior Orange procession passed along the Newtownards Road. Orangemen claimed that a Tricolour was waved at them and insults shouted from Catholic streets. Catholic residents denied this and reported that a breakaway mob from the crowd with the procession had stormed into the Catholic area. It was then, in the confusion that shots were fired by one Protestant mob at another.

Abuse at Unity Flats

RESIDENTS of Unity Flats in Belfast were yesterday subjected to three hours of the bitterest provocation from Orange mobs that they had experienced since the Troubles began in the city. Despite an assurance by the Army authorities that they would not allow any people to assemble near the Flats, thousands of Orangemen and women, many of them waving Union Jacks, lined thoroughfares near the flats and began singing party songs and shouting anti-Catholic obscenities.

Police and military stood by without taking any action. Later a deputation, consisting of Councillor William Napier, Mr John Watson and Mr William Largey complained to the GOC, General Harry Tuzo about the conduct of the crowds. General Tuzo, who was near the flats at the time, told them that he had witnessed something that day that had given him cause for serious concern.

NICRA Gets New Board

THE new officer board of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association is as follows: Chairman, Ivan Barr, Strabane; Vice-chairman, Frank Gogarty; Secretary, Mrs Edwina Stewart; Treasurer, Miss Ann Hope; Press Officer, Kevin Boyle. (The build-up of interface tensions in 1971 mimicked the 1920s when East and North Belfast were hotbeds of sectarian violence and house-burning by mobs. General Tuzo – a very political GOC – would oversee the internment operation that summer.)

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