

**‘Never spoken here’, ‘Rammed down our throats’ – the rhetoric of detractors and disparagers of Gaelic in the press:
Gaelic in Press Discourse and Public Attitudes.**

Evidence to The Leveson Inquiry, September 2012.

Press discourse on Gaelic

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act of 2005 provided for official recognition in terms of equal respect for Gaelic and English, and the establishment of a statutory Gaelic language authority, Bòrd na Gàidhlig in 2006. In 2008 the Gaelic television channel BBC Alba commenced broadcasting under the aegis of MG Alba (the operating name of the Gaelic Media Service, the successor to the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee, and the Gaelic Television Fund). Press reportage and comment on these events and what has developed from them in terms of policies and provisions has been varied.

In general there has been an increasing press focus upon Gaelic in recent years, and for the most part this has been factual and favourable. This is a distinct improvement on the situation going back over the decades when Gaelic very rarely featured in press stories. It was not particularly salient even in local papers covering the ‘Gaelic areas’, and was very infrequent in the national press. However, despite increasing reportage, and features of Gaelic-related stories, there has also been an increasing element of detraction and disparagement, which is the subject of this paper. Press treatment of Gaelic issues might be viewed on a spectrum of most-to-least favourable in such terms as:-

- 1) Good news stories with a favourable ‘spin’,
- 2) Factual reportage / straightforward information,
- 3) Critical ‘fair comment’,
- 4) ‘Knocking copy’, and
- 5) Outright abuse.

This paper focuses on the last two of these categories, and in particular presents examples of these over a recent 12-month period, between March 2010 and February 2011. The specific nature of these may be variously categorised, but I feel that they can be conveniently thought of as follows:-

- 1) **Disinformation**, such as the deliberate mis-reporting of official statistics and budgetary items of public bodies.
- 2) **Pseudo-history** or false impressions of past situations.(e.g. ‘Never spoken here’)
- 3) **Exaggeration.** (e.g. ‘Rammed down our throats.’)
- 4) Use of **disparaging catch phrases** (e.g. Professional Gaels, Gaelic Mafia)
- 5) **Astroturf organisations** (e.g. Taxpayers’ Alliance)
- 6) **Fault-finding.**
- 7) A cadre of persistently **anti-Gaelic columnists** ‘Professional anti-Gaels’ (e.g. John Gibson, Michael Fry, Allan Brown, George Galloway, Keith Aitken, Mike Lowson)

8) Personal **invective and abuse** (e.g. ‘Hickey’s’ ‘Mad Dog’ MacQuarrie, ‘Horrible’ Russell).

9) **Puerility.**

10) **Funding priorities**

I present examples of each of these categories below, with comment and discussion.

1. **Disinformation and mis-reporting**

This was the most numerous category, whether or not the misinformation was deliberate, or merely down to sheer ignorance. Frequently large sums of money are juxtaposed together with relatively small jobs, with the inference of sheer profligacy. For example, replacement of monolingual with bilingual roadsigns on two trunk roads was costed at £680,000 as if they were all to be replaced at once instead of when necessary over time, and as if no cost was attributable to monolingual signs. (news story in Oban Times 22 April 10) **(1)** Another story costed the bilingual roadsign policy at £26 million (news item in Daily Record 9 July 10) **(2)**, and picture caption in Daily Record 12 July 10) **(3)** This figure was probably confused with the total Gaelic budget on all services. Scottish Government staff were also reported as ‘forced to take Gaelic training’. The story was also reported in the Daily Mail (8 July 10) **(4)** as ‘£26 m plan to make us Gaels’, again with public sector workers forced to undergo Gaelic training. The item also carried a plea from the Taxpayers’ Alliance to bring taxes down, and a quote from a Conservative MSP (Ted Brocklebank) to save Gaelic in the Highlands and not inflict it on other areas.

Reference to the displacement of BBC radio channels to make way for BBC Alba on Freeview was frequently made. (e.g. letter in the West Highland Free Press 9 Apr 10) **(5)** Nowhere as this story developed was any reference made to the necessity for bandwidth to be allocated to ITV channels such as STV+1, as well as to BBC. Likewise the Daily Mail alleged (Alan Roden on 01 Oct 10) **(6)** that BBC stations could be axed to make way for Gaelic TV channel. They are of course not being ‘axed’ as such and their evening-only withdrawal from Freeview is as much to make bandwidth available for STV+1 as BBC Alba. Similar ‘news copy’ was carried by the Sun (22 Dec 09) **(7)** which also alleged that BBC Alba has just 35,000 viewers who speak the language (in a grammatical construction implying that it has no others).

The Daily Express (news item 01 March 2010) **(8)** was also critical of BBC Alba for monitoring audience figures through TNS System Three rather than through BARB. It author David Scott quoted audience figures but seemingly did not understand the concept of statistical reliability of BARB methodology for different sizes of audience. He also alleged a BBC spend of £30million on BBC Alba without giving details of timespan or breakdown. A letter in the Scotsman (14 Sept 10) **(9)** alleges the costs of BBC Alba at £20 million per annum to reach only a proportion of the 60,000 Gaelic speakers (whereas its targets and current reach cover both Gaelic and non-Gaelic-speakers.)

Another figure plucked out of the air was the alleged £1million being required of the National Galleries for bilingual signage. (opinion columnist David Massie in the Daily Mail 14 Feb 11) **(10)** This type of disinformation then gets reflected as given truth in readers’ letters, which papers then print. (See Scotsman 14 Feb 11.) **(11)** The Daily Mail raised an alarm over £300,000 being spent on a Gaelic gazetteer ‘which makes up versions...of place names’, and suggested this should be ‘created for free by Gaelic enthusiasts working in co-operation with academics’. (editorial Daily Mail 20 Aug 10) **(12)** The news item by Andrew Picken in the same issue criticised a spend of £700,000 on Gaelic signs in Glasgow

‘where only 3,000 people are able to speak, read and write Gaelic’. The actual city figures were over double that – or about 10,000 if the suburbs are included.

The supposed imposition of Gaelic on school pupils, e.g. in place of French or German (Daily Mail 13 July 10) **(13)** has a grain of truth – but not with the spin as here. The editorial contrasted the ‘crucial career advantage’ of French and German over Gaelic, ‘as if more immediate careers were not to be had through Gaelic.. The Daily Express also alleged (31 Aug 10) **(14)** that nursery children were to be taught the language ‘whether their parents want this or not.’ According to the Daily Mail (news item 8 Sept 10) **(15)** ‘cash-strapped’ Edinburgh is to spend £2 million on teaching more children Gaelic (with the almost invariable comment from the Taxpayers’ Alliance) – as if English-medium education re without cost.. The Mail also carried a query (letter 10 Sep 10) **(16)** on ‘what research was being carried out to find out if parents want their offspring to learn Gaelic’ (no details given an what research is being carried out – or the views of the Taxpayers’ Alliance on its cost.).

Gaelic was accused of creating a ‘two-tier school system’, and Bòrd na Gàidhlig of a ‘major drive to put Gaelic on an equal footing with English, at a projected cost...of millions of pounds’ (news item, Daily Mail 9 July 10). **(17)** If only !

The Press and Journal printed as fact that the that the majority of Scotland’s Gaelic speakers were in the Western Isles. (news item 4 June 10). **(18)** The actual proportion was 26%. Similar assertions were also made by Ian Jack in the Guardian for 11 Dec 10, and more recently with much more disinformation and invective by David Walker in the Largs and Millport News for 12 Feb 2012. (See reference 89 below.)

2. Pseudo-history and false impressions

Awareness of the facts of Scottish history is often woefully deficient amongst opinion columnists and elected representatives who express strong anti-Gaelic views. In an article on bilingual station and road signs, Mike Lowson (Press and Journal 10 Nov 10) **(19)** seemed entirely ignorant that the Montrose area was in fact Gaelic-speaking in the middle ages, and regarded a bilingual station sign as ‘irrelevantly bilingual’. As with many places in eastern Scotland it thus has an original Gaelic name.

A couple of years ago the Caithness councillor John Rosie vigorously opposed the replacement of a few worn-out roadsigns in his area with bilingual versions on the grounds that Gaelic ‘ was never spoken here’, and that the area’s background was Norse and not Gaelic. Much debate over the past couple of years seems to have mellowed him, and a later letter in the Herald (21 Oct 10) **(20)** seems to indicate that he has considerably boned up on his Scottish history. However he still maintains that ‘Gaelic was never the language of all Scotland.’ And that ‘Erse did appear with the Irish settlers to the Western Isles.’ A strong Norse background is in fact not exclusive to his Caithness dialect but is also shared by Gaelic. If Norn, spoken in Caithness in the early middle ages, still has a relevance today as a determinant of roadsign policy, by the same token so does Gaelic throughout present-day Scotland. But the sheer ignorance of Gaelic having been spoken at some period in every part of what is now present-day Scotland (albeit before, after or together with other languages) seems to have been absent from the education of many Scots today. Judging by readers’ letters this is quite common, e.g.-

‘ Gaelic is not the first language of Scotland, it never was and never will be’ (P & J 28 Sep 10) **(21)**;

‘Gaelic never took hold below the Forth-Clyde line’ (Daily Mail 19 July 10) **(22)**;

‘I have always thought of Gaelic as regional’ (Inverness Courier 22 Oct 10) **(23)**;

'as far as I know Gaelic was never spoken in the south-east' (letter re Drem, Scotsman 15 Feb 11) **(24)**;

'Linlithgow where Gaelic has never been the local language' (Linlithgow Gazette 10 Sep 10) **(25)**.

In addition to Mike Lawson, many others seem to be unaware of the historic ubiquity of Gaelic in Scotland, and this deficiency gets aired frequently in the press.

3. Exaggeration

The debate on opportunities to use Gaelic, and cultural facilities for Gaelic users can be relied upon to throw up some time-worn clichés. Bilingual signs are often held to be 'thrusting Gaelic down our throats', e.g. Roxanne Sorooshian, if the language is used outwith 'the Highland hinterland', (in Sunday Herald 19 Sep 10) **(26)**; or in 'the vast majority of our country', (letter in Daily Mail 05 Oct 10.) **(27)** In a public panel discussion James Campbell, Thurso, was quoted (Press and Journal 29 March 10) **(28)** as regarding Gaelic as ' a minority movement, with the backing of the Gaelic Act – they are ramming it down our throats.' A letter-writer in the Daily Mail for 05 Oct 10 **(29)** complained, '...it is wrong to force Gaelic down the throats of the vast majority of our country who want to live in the 21st century.'

The appearance of bilingual signage is alleged to produce even greater havoc such as 'Signs splitting communities' (letter, Sunday Herald 18 April 10). **(30)** Headline writers often allege 'fury' (Scottish Daily Express 31 Aug 10 **(31)**); 'fear' (Daily Mail 01 Oct 10 **(32)**, Scotland on Sunday 13 Feb 11 **(33)**; Scotsman 14 Feb 11**(34)**); 'anger' (Daily Mail 06 Oct 10) **(35)**, 'outrage' (Daily Mail 14 April 10) **(36)**, 'outcry' (Daily Telegraph 11 Feb 11) **(37)**, and the like.

In a city with so many Gaelic organisations, Colin Campbell (Inverness Courier 20 Jan 11) **(38)** regards it as 'biased' to provide Gaelic cultural facilities in the Highland capital, Inverness. Promotion of Gaelic seems to be affording it 'special, protected status'; which must take its place in ' a very long queue'.

Teaching Gaelic to schoolchildren whether the parents want it or not, and bilingual signs and documents are 'what is wrong (in) having Gaelic forced upon us,' according to a letter in the Daily Mail (21 Dec 10) **(39)**.

Exaggeration that BBC Alba is a round-the-clock TV channel (Colin Campbell column in Highland News 12 June 10) **(40)** is very far from being the case in reality. Similarly, 'Gaelic receiving a staggering 245% extra per head on Gaelic culture compared with the rest of the UK (Hickey in Daily Express 16 June 10) **(41)** is neither believable nor particularly amusing. Neither was 'the near-dead lingo spoken by 2,500 persons – not the 3,765,000 claimed by BBC Alba' according to Hickey in the Express of 03 Nov 10) **(42)**.

In November councillor accusations of support for council policies on Gaelic being akin to conditions under the Third Reich represent perhaps the unacceptable upper limit on exaggeration – and the press did well to draw attention to them. (See below, in Section 8.)

A letter in the Daily Mail for 2we3 June 10 **(43)** complains of a spend of £850,000 per day for 'Gaelic media service'. This equates to over £310 million annually. Some hopes of that !

Clichés such as 'dying languages', 'life-support systems', and the like, also featured, even in items which were otherwise favourable or supportive (such is the pervasiveness of such terminology, the extent to which it is perpetrated, and taken root.) e.g. 'A virtually dead language' (letter, Scotsman 21 Sep 10) **(44)**.

4. Disparaging catch phrases

‘Gaelic does not even have a modern grammar’ was attributed to Hugh Andrew, editor of Birlinn (in Daily Mail news item 14 Feb 11) (45) – and subsequent items said he should know better.

Expression such as ‘teuchter’ and ‘Highland Mafia’ still get an airing in print, as with Ian Jack in The Guardian 11 Dec 10 (see reference 89), and as in letter in the Herald 8 June 10 (46), which also quoted an earlier article (Bruce Morton in The Herald 31 May 10) (47) referring to ‘the Gaels as being “water-fearing clowns” .’

The Press and Journal (29 Mar 10) (48) reported businessman Harry Gray as regarding Gaelic as a hobby. It led to rejoinders but this type of disparagement obviously leads to others following suit, as was indeed the case in a letter to the Scotsman of 17 April 10. (49)

Comparison of provisions and policies for Gaelic with ‘Brigadoon’ was also made, e.g. in a letter in Big Issue Scotland 7 – 13 June 10 (50) ‘fripperies to indulge the SNP’s Brigadoon-inspired fantasies.’

5 Astroturf organisations

‘An Astroturf campaign is a fake grassroots movement. It purports to be a spontaneous uprising of concerned citizens, but in reality is funded by elite interests. Some Astroturf campaigns have no grassroots component at all.’ (George Monbiot in The Guardian, 26. Sep.10) (51) The Taxpayers’ Alliance in the UK is one such organisation. It is funded by David and Charles Koch who ‘own 84% of Koch Industries the second largest private company in the United States.’ (Monbiot, *ibid.*) They also fund the Tea Party, Americans for Prosperity, and various other hard-right think-tanks and pressure groups. Attention has been drawn to their funding of the Taxpayers’ Alliance in the UK, and Tea Party links with the English Defence League, e.g. by Mark Townsend in The Observer 10. Oct. 2010 (52), George Monbiot in Guardian 26 Oct.10 (53) and 14 Dec.10 (54); Julian Kosoff in Telegraph 19 Oct.10 (55), and the Hough feature on 10 Sep 10 and the Riteman feature in My Telegraph 11 Oct.10. (56)

It is noteworthy against this background, that the adverse criticism in the Scottish Daily Mail of Gaelic organisations and expenditure on Gaelic-related measures frequently incorporates a comment from the Taxpayers’ Alliance. e.g. in press items printed in the issues of 09 March 10 (57), 26 March 10 (58), 14 Apr 10 (59); 15.Apr.10 (60) , also echoed in Comment, 24 Apr 10 (61), 07 July 10 (62); 14 July 10 (63), 3 Aug 10 (64); 31 Aug 10 (65); 03 Sep 10 (66); and 12 Sep 10. (67) The Taxpayers’ Alliance was then given some respite and quotations were provided by the Campaign Against Political Correctness on 04 Oct 10 (68), and by the Campaign for Real Education on 06 Oct 10. (69) Then it was back again to the Taxpayers’ Alliance on 09 Dec 10. (70) The reporting method in all these articles is to provide a mixture of factual items on Gaelic, generally with some spin to suggest that sums of money involved are wildly exorbitant. This is suggested by an absence of timespan or breakdown of the sums in question. Although there is frequent reference to the size of the Gaelic community in order to stress its minority character, there is never any analysis to compare expenditure per capita .on Gaelic-related infrastructural, cultural or educational items with the majority non-Gaelic-speaking population, which would present the expenditure in perspective. There is also recourse to alleged ‘experts’ and political spokespersons, none of whom probably have much familiarity with Gaelic issues, to comment on what the paper feeds them. In the case of certain academics (whom I have never heard of), I am nevertheless surprised they fall for it.

The Scottish Daily Mail press story on ‘Drive to impose Gaelic’ and Comment on ‘SNP’s crank project’ of 13 July 10 (71) did not carry a Taxpayers’ Alliance quotation. It was however obviously targeted at

SNP ministers in the Scottish Government, as were the items printed on 08 July 10 **(72)** (‘SNP Gaelic vanity project’) and on 09 July 10 **(73)** – again surprisingly without Taxpayers’ Alliance comment.

6. Fault-finding, alleged inaccuracy, etc.

News items, editorials, commentator columnists and readers’ letters are all fertile ground for fault-finding with the language itself, its speakers, and official policies which give the language its due ‘cut of the cake’ in terms of public funding.

Alleged inaccuracy of Gaelic signage around Inverness Airport (letter in Nairnshire Telegraph for 20 April 10) **(74)**, and alleged serious accidents and fatalities attributable to bilingual signage in Argyll (Big Issue Scotland 7 – 13 June 2010 **(75)**) are typical of many others.

‘No ‘monoglot’ Gaelic speakers ... renders this costly exercise (bilingual signs) redundant’. Graham Grant in Daily Mail 08 July 10 **(76)** betrays a limited and purely instrumental image of language function. The article rubbished at length most current provisions for Gaelic, with some inaccuracy on numbers of Gaelic speakers in Glasgow, and education policies to drop French and German in favour of Gaelic. It concluded with ‘farcical scenes’ in a Holyrood Gaelic debate, and the ‘buffoonery’ of an interpreter as ‘the final insult to the proud old tongue, and to everyone with a genuine passion for its revival.’

Various papers criticised Bòrd na Gàidhlig for engaging a recruitment agency whose head could not speak Gaelic: Highland News 10 Feb 11 **(77)**, Press and Journal 11 Feb 11 **(78)**, Sun 10 Feb 11 **(79)**, Telegraph 11 Feb 11 **(80)**, Daily Mail 11 Feb 11 **(81)** (with news item and editorial.) – as if there were plenty HR outfits with Gaelic speaking bosses to choose from, or indeed as if this were germane to the issue of staff recruitment anyway. The ‘news’ item in the Mail even asserted that the ‘New Gaelic quango boss....can’t speak the language.’

7. Professional Anti-Gaels

Many of the Scottish press regular opinion columnists have a fairly consistent ant-Gaelic line. It may be that they see this as a professional requirement in order to demonstrate fearless, forthright opinions. They do not however bring such robust comment to bear on other linguistic or ethnic minorities.

Two letters in the Scotsman (20 Apr 10) **(82)** referred to an earlier article by Michael Fry who had expressed negative views on the rejuvenation of Gaelic, had neglected its cultural wealth, and evidently written on the practical limitations of Gaelic and neglected its ‘deep emotional commitment.’ Similar letters were printed on 17 April 10. **(83)**

The article itself (16 April 10) **(84)** was a fairly low-key deprecatory piece on the language and its speakers. There was little over-the-top invective or exaggeration but plenty of mild deprecation such as ‘Gaels ,,,, dipping sheep or digging peats amongst the howling gales of Harris or Morvern’, and retreating ‘into their own circles’. They ‘babble among themselves at the bar or in the shop but switch to English as soon as a stranger walks in.’, while ‘White Settlers transformed the Highlands ... halted the decline in population, and made the region ... quite prosperous.’ Otherwise his method appears to be to recount things which are otherwise laudable and praiseworthy, such as parents wishing the best education for their children and getting good jobs with their qualifications – but giving this a derogatory spin because it involves Gaelic. Also to include things like depopulation and emigration and seeming to suggest they are the Gaels’ own fault. Nevertheless amongst all this there are some telling points which may be factual enough to rank as fair comment.

Keith Aiken seems to be a regular columnist in the Express. He appears with a self-portrait to assure readers of character. So far as Gaelic is concerned, there seems to be a frequent column-inch which is meant to be pointed and pithy. The item on 08 Apr 10 **(85)** sent up the use of ‘recognise Gaelic’ as an aim of education in Glasgow ‘... and then ... so what?’ The item for 15 April 10 **(86A)** sent up ‘Weegie Yooni ... as a world leader in Gaelic education’. The two column-inches for 4 Nov 10 **(86B)** focused on bilingual versions of station signs in Edinburgh and Glasgow juxtaposed with a portrait of an ape. These efforts at humour might have been better classified as puerility – see below.

John Gibson, ‘Edinburgh’s best known columnist’, is another regular castigator of Gaelic, in the Edinburgh Evening News, and his item on 24 March 10 **(87)** focused on such issues as the Gaelic Mafia, Weegie headquarters, deer abandoning Gaelic during the rut, and BBC Alba audience figures ‘decimated’ from 600,000 to 200,000. His piece for 21 Feb 11 **(88)**: ‘Li’l ol’ Gael-baiter me. Loonies, Numpties...pandering to the Gaels-a-go-go mob’ could have been copied from Hickey !

I am without an example of Allan Brown in this review period – perhaps he is running out of steam. However one or two other columnists have focused on Gaelic, such as Roxanne Sorooshian in the Sunday Herald (see above) and Ian Jack in the Guardian for 11 Dec 10. **(89)** Under the headline that states he is ‘saddened by Scotland going Gaelic’ he unusually widens his sights to include discussion of Islamic societies and Mohammedan items of clothing – so care is needed to avoid fatwahs. However we have “*Teuchter* [Highland] mafia” i.e. Gaelic speakers in promoted positions in the BBC.. He repeats the canard of ‘most’ Gaelic speakers being concentrated in the Western Isles and has some conjectural statistics on ‘Cantonese speakers in the UK’, as well as Bengali, Urdu and Sylheti, and migrant languages of eastern Europe (none with a subsidised television channel of their own). There is also an arguably fair enough discussion of Gaelic tokenism.

George Galloway has proved over the years that he has little time for Gaelic. His piece in the Record for 30 August 10 **(90A)** focused on ‘...amazing how many Highlanders and islanders pop up on the screen and on the airwaves at the Beeb. Crawford and Farquharsons are also everywhere backstage. And they’ve got BBC Alba too.’ Time to move “north” – to Salford or Stornoway. Earlier pieces featured rather more invective, e.g. in the Mail on Sunday for 12 Oct 2003 **(90B)**: ‘Prepare for a storm if we are forced to be Gaels’. This focused on a ‘wave of bi-lingualism’ sweeping the land from John O’Groats to the Border, including ‘ramming a language understood by less than 2 per cent of Scots down the throats of the other 98 per cent’. We are informed that there are twice as many Punjabi speakers than Gaelic (from what statistical source is not stated), and ‘It has never been our national language’.

8. Personal invective and abuse

The inclusion of support for council policies on Gaelic in job specs for prospective head teachers led to Highland councillors Rosie and Mackay making an accusation of policies akin to those of the Nazi Third Reich. (News story John O’ Groat Journal, 26 Nov 10 **(91)**, Press & Journal 27 Nov 10 **(92)**.) Here the press is very commendably drawing attention to the anti-Gaelic sentiments uttered by two public representatives. The press can sometimes perpetrate its own brand of denigration of Gaelic in circumstances where denigration of other minority languages and cultures would land it in big trouble.

During this review period Daily Express columnist Hickey developed similarly unpleasant parallels with wartime Germany, e.g. on 13 July 10 **(93)** with a piece alleging that a Gaelic-speaking POW “Aonghas” was one of many Gaels from the Western Isles ‘who fought for the Jerries’ (and was pardoned in 1945 by the new Labour government.) This item did elicit reaction from Gaelic, veteran, and Western Isles circles – but not to the extent of action under race-relations and equality legislation. However a letter in Hebrides News for 05 Aug 10 **(94)** put the reaction in focus: ‘Had Hickey directed his accusations at

Southern English service personnel at this very moment disgruntled military types from the Home Counties would be instructing their lawyers to prepare a legal case against him – if they had not already strung him up. And had the derisory terms reserved for Gaelic been said about Arabic, Hickey would probably require 24 hour police protection from sinister bearded Middle Eastern gentlemen and from the outraged politically correct.’ Reaction to Hickey’s item did elicit some sort of reply (hardly an apology) from the Editor, to be followed by Hickey’s next piece on 21 June 10 **(95)** with unrepentant reference to “*Panzer – Marsch !*” by *Generaloberst Heinz Guderian*.

9. Puerility

Press references to Gaelic abound in sheer puerility. This may be said to do the ‘anti-‘ cause no great good – but constant dripping, and throwing enough mud do have their eventual effect.

A good example is Ian Black’s ‘No’ case in answer to Art Cormack’s ‘Yes’ case for Gaelic in Glasgow in the Sunday Herald for 11 April 10. **(96)** The whole item contains little more than reference to ‘Gaelic is shite’, Glasgow Council supposedly making him speak and read it, navigating bilingual roadsigns in the Highlands and Wales, Glesca Patter, haudrum and heiderum.

Hickey’s column in the Express is a running exercise in puerility. I was personally acquainted with the original (William) Hickey, Tom Driberg. He was an urbane, witty and cultured individual who reported on the ‘bright young things’ and the ‘smart set’ in the Tatler and the Express in the 1930s and ‘40s for the benefit of us lesser mortals, as well as being Labour MP for Barking. His successor seems to be the opposite on all counts.

I hesitate to waste much time on this column, but to give a taster, the item for 01 March 10 **(97)** dealt with “Mad Dog” MacQuarrie, “Haemorrhoids and neeps”; 03 March 10 **(98)** focused on ‘wacky Gaels on their ancient wooden skis’, and Gaelic signs causing a 455% increase in accidents to ‘English, Frog, Urdu, German, etc speakers’; 08 April 10 **(99)** Mr Mike “Horrible” Russell, the Edukashun minister, “who pledged that ... at least 33 per cent of Gaelic speakers will be from ethnic backgrounds”; 16 April 10 **(100)** ‘Crazed Nat Alistair Allan, gabbling in some obscure lingo’; 04 Aug 10 **(101)** re a resident of Harris acquiring ‘a brand-new Mercedes-Benz ... (£21,480) purchased under the EU/Scottish Government Gaelic Support Initiative.’; 03 Sep 10 **(102)** ‘Mr Mike “Horrible” Russell, self-styled Gaelic kultur gauleiter’; 07 Sep 10 **(103)** The Pope, and “Mad Dog” MacQuarrie’ again; 06 Oct 10 informing us that the Gaelic for television is “Telefishion!. – plus many other similar gems too tedious to recount.

A news item in the News of the World (21 Nov 10) **(104)** on abilities of ‘kids who go to Gaelic-only schools’ alleges that an Edinburgh University study on the subject ‘finds the conversations are very short, usually just: “Sorry, me no speakie English.”

A letter reporting a road rage incident in the Largs and Millport News 08 Sep 10 **(105)** quoted the perpetrator as shouting, “Away ye f+++++ eejit”, which the writer took to be a welcome to Scotland in Gaelic.

Whether these puerilities are really worth reporting or bothering about further, they are nevertheless included in the public prints by their editors, and over time position Gaelic amongst their readers as a joke language with low public esteem.

10) Funding priorities

Correspondents to newspapers as well as news copy writers frequently juxtapose expenditure on Gaelic with failing or under-funded public services, such as:-

‘crumbling schools’ (letter Daily Mail 23 July 10) **(106)**

‘care in twilight years’ and school equipment (letter Big Issue Scotland 7-13 June 10) **(107)**

10millions spent on Gaelic college on Skye...whilst the main hospital is old and falling to bits (letter in Daily Mail 21 July 10) **(108)**

frontline NHS staff losing their jobs...millions propping up a dying language (letter Scottish Sunday Express 25 July 10) **(109)**

£26 million down the drain while we have NHS cuts, roads disintegrating, village halls and libraries under threat of closure (letter in Daily Mail 13 July 10). **(110)**

More than 1,500 nursing posts axed ... and 2,500 police officers could lose their jobs (news item Daily Mail 14 July 10) **(111)**

13,000 children leave primary school without being able to read or write (Liz Smith MSP in the Herald 7 Apr 10) **(112)**

On bilingual signage a letter-writer in the Sunday Herald for 18 Apr 10 **(113)** felt the authorities should reconsider imposing Gaelic on all ... and concentrate on ...the Gaelic heartland of the Western Isles, parts of the west mainland and Argyll islands.

Welsh and Scottish Gaelic programmes are ignored by the majority and therefore should be reduced or scrapped (letter in the Daily Mail 14 July 10). **(114)**

Conclusions

Reading through a year’s trawl of the anti-Gaelic press items and ‘knocking copy’ was to say the least depressing. This was not only on account of the anti-Gaelic attitudes expressed which indicate ‘ .. an irrational but profound hostility to Gaelic education and to Gaelic more generally’, (as in a letter in Edinburgh Evening News 17 Feb 11) **(115)**, but also very much on account of the widespread ignorance of, or lack of basic knowledge of Scottish history. Whether to blame this on wilfully ignorant individuals or a lack of purpose in Scottish education over the nation’s own history would need a study to itself. Many who should know better evidenced a dismal lack of knowledge of the facts of the place of Gaelic in the nation’s story. Many quite openly informed us it had never been spoken throughout Scotland or in some part of the country with which they claimed to be familiar.

A further dispiriting element was those whose image of democracy extended no rights to minorities, and seemingly wished to close down media channels unless they were a majority choice. This displays a basic lack of civic awareness and any understanding of majoritarian and consociational forms of democracy. If buses only ran for majorities they would rarely stop to let people on or off. If you subscribe to Sky it would be a pity to have most of its 900-odd television and radio channels shut down on these grounds. A letter-writer in the Press and Journal (23 Feb 11) **(116)** felt that cleaning and repairing the streets should take priority over Gaelic signs in Inverness. He wrote. ‘I have obviously been labouring all these years under the belief that democracy was for the majority and not the minority. ‘ Such thinking seemed to underlie other anti-Gaelic items although not so explicitly expressed. Frequent reference to only 50/ or

60,000 speakers and 1% or 1.2% of the population testifies to this attitude and makes the unspoken conclusion it therefore does not matter.

Allied to this there is a strong vein of thinking on the place of Gaelic in society which seems to stem directly from nineteenth-century philosophy, science and social thought. A definite utilitarian attitude is quite pervasive. For example a local councillor in a broadcast radio discussion on these issues last year stated, 'I stand for utility.' - as though nothing else mattered.! Such attitudes seem to underlie much of the 'knocking copy' reviewed above. The idea that Gaelic is without value has been engendered over a long period and dies hard. One Gaelic speaker writing on the prospects for his language seemed to have given up completely on it: 'it will never be the living language that I and others knew and loved. (letter in the Stornoway Gazette 21 Oct 10). (117) In fact 'There is a time to be born and a time to die' (- a sad quote from Ecclesiastes 3: 2.)

In addition to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, ideas of Herbert Spenser's 'survival of the fittest' and mistaken applications of Charles Darwin's concept of natural selection still affect public attitudes on this issue. The positivist natural philosophy and science of their times underlies the deterministic fatalism over the fate of the language and the sense that Gaelic has no part in the 21st century. 'We are born into the age of the present and our language has evolved to communicate in the present, not the past. I humbly rest my case.' (letter in Inverness Courier 9 November 10.) (118) Michael Fry concluded his article in The Scotsman (16 Apr 10) (119) with the deterministic thought: 'The whole business is an exercise in futility, the product of the groundless belief in Scotland that government's wishful thinking and public subsidy to special pleading can make things happen. When will we ever learn.' Nineteenth-century scientism gave rise to twentieth-century progressivism, and in Scotland at least this process has been taken to imply that Gaelic has therefore no part in twenty-first century life.

There was evidence too of nineteenth-century images of language in society in such views as that the lack of monoglot speakers of Gaelic implies there is no need for bilingual signage. The census question on monoglots has not been asked since 1971 – so this is supposition, but probably a fair enough assumption.

I had a lot of sympathy for people who wanted care services, libraries, hospitals, schools, health and public protection services, roads and streets maintained. However, they seemed to think they have been given an either / or choice vis-à-vis spending on public services or Gaelic. They have been given an impression that funding on Gaelic is so astronomical that it would make a difference if it was diverted to these ends. Unfortunately again public images of the relative amounts of public expenditure in all these respects are woefully deficient. The frequent recourse to the Taxpayers' Alliance in one particular newspaper (the Scottish Daily Mail) and its priorities in public spending were taken up and repeated by many letter writers. As a regular reader of unsolicited public communications to one Gaelic official body (MG Alba) I regularly encounter the same points almost verbatim over and over again. The Daily Mail editorial comment on 'High Cost of Gaelic' (20 Aug 10) (120) aptly epitomises this line of disinformation.

The drip, drip, drip of knocking copy on Gaelic from this source and others can have the effect of constructing a false reality of Gaelic in Scottish history, its relevance in different parts of the country and nationally today, and the extent to which basic Gaelic infrastructure and cultural facilities are financed. This is a construct that can lodge in people's minds impervious as to reasonable discussion and the facts. It may be well questioned why this is done. In some respects it seems to be a concerted and deliberate ploy. In other respects it seems to result from sheer ignorance. It may also betoken 'White guilt about...what is essentially the dead language of a dead people' (letter in Scotsman 22 Apr 10.) (121) There may be some who feel Gaelic 'should be' Scotland's language and they 'should speak' it – but the whole thing is way beyond them and they turn against it. It may even betoken an irrational and deep-

seated prejudice against other cultures in general. Under equality and race-relations legislation this cannot be manifested publicly so it comes out obliquely and gets displaced onto Gaelic. I have termed this ‘Munchausen’s Linguaphobic Syndrome by Proxy’ – and not altogether as a joke either. However at almost every Gaelic-related meeting I have attended since 1994 I have called for psycholinguistic, attitudinal and motivational research into attitudes towards Gaelic both on the part of Gaelic speakers themselves and their use of Gaelic, and also of the general public towards it. I am pleased to say that at long last this is beginning to be addressed by Bòrd na Gàidhlig in its commissioned research, and by higher education research priorities as well. Hopefully it may serve as an evidential base for long-overdue policy-making. However whether such depth psychological investigation could be brought to bear upon the professional detractors and others who seem to have irrational reactions to a few Gaelic words on a signboard is another matter entirely.

Implications and Recommendations

This brief survey has shown up some pervasive and deeply-held misconceptions about Gaelic. It would be extremely difficult to address these as they stem from longstanding prejudices in society. The Gaelic poet Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, who wrote of *gò is mìoruin mhòir nan Gall (the deceit and great ill-will of the Lowlanders)* some two and a half centuries ago, was quoted in a letter to The Herald for 8 June 2010. **(122)** Patiently answering these various factual errors, stereotypes and misinformations is likely to butter few parsnips even if the replies do get printed. All this places Gaelic on the back foot, and in any case someone else is in charge of the microphone or megaphone. That said, it would however be entirely beneficial to have a cadre of knowledgeable and pro-Gaelic letter-writers who could be relied upon or organised to ‘take up the cudgels’. And it would be excellent too for some humour to be brought to bear upon it.

Thought must be given to how this misinformation (deliberate or otherwise) can be corrected or eradicated at source. Education and focus in school curricula is a long-term prospect. A lifetime in the business of addressing such issues in secondary, further and higher education has brought home to me the difficulties of addressing deep-seated prejudice, ingrained misconceptions, and obdurate refusal to respond to reasoned appeal or the facts.

Shorter term aims need at least to carry the debate forward effectively and positively, and it would be good for Gaelic organisations specifically to address how they can concertedly engage in this. At the very least, certain sections of the press have been getting away with flagrant public misinformation which goes well beyond fair comment and toleration for a variety of views.

There is urgent need for the official and semi-official authorities of Gaeldom to get over to a wider public more good news stories, and the message that in a plural society its different social components have as legitimate a place in society as any other. They pay their taxes, create wealth, and play their part in society. In our form of democracy they are entitled to their fair share of the cake as regards infrastructure, educational and cultural provision. Our society is not, or at least should not be, one where ‘winner’ takes all. Over the centuries our language and culture have suffered precisely because that has often been the case in the wider social environment and provision of public facilities.

Times are difficult – and that is no novelty – however, this social sector has in fact taken its fair share of the economies, and as taxpayers and wealth-creators, plays its part with everybody else. This view has been tacitly and specifically denied in some sections of the press. It is time for a fight-back, and we must carefully consider our strategies and tactics. To date our position has been reactive rather than proactive, and the points we have raised have been *ad hoc* rather than on grounds of our own determination. Bruce won Bannockburn on a field of his own choice with odds of ten to one against.

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Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed

Date **6th September 2012**