

Éamon Ó Cuív TD

## **Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta**

Is cúis áthais dom a bheith in bhur láthair inniu ag Comhdháil Bhliantúil Aontas Institiúidí Náisiúnta Teangacha na hEorpa nó EFNIL. Mo bhuíochas le lucht eagraithe na hócáide seo agus go mór le **Foras na Gaeilge** as ucht an cuireadh labhairt leis an gcomhdháil inniu. Is é téama na comhdhála i mbliana ná an caidreamh idir theangacha oifigiúla náisiúnta agus teangacha mionlaigh agus réigiúnacha, ábhar atá thar a bheith spésiúil, leathan agus tábhachtach dar liom.<sup>1</sup>

It gives me great pleasure to be with you this morning at this the seventh annual conference of the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL). I would like to extend an especially warm welcome to those who have travelled to Ireland from overseas. The theme for this year's conference is “The Relationship between Official National Languages and Regional and Minority Languages”. This is a broad and very relevant theme which should allow plenty of scope for discussion and sharing of experiences during the course of the conference. I am delighted that Foras na Gaeilge plays an active part in this federation. While each language situation is different, there is much that we can learn from each other to improve the measures we take to support our own language.

### **1. Twenty Year Strategy for Irish Language**

As some of you present today may be aware the Irish Government are currently finalising a 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language. The strategy stems from the Government's 2006 policy statement on the Irish language which contained 13 policy objectives. In drafting the strategy, my department undertook an extensive consultation process which included seeking feedback from the public and the employment of international consultants with expertise in language issues. Key action areas identified from this process include, amongst others, education, the Gaeltacht, and language transmission within the family and community. The main objective of the strategy, which is already in the public domain, is to increase over the next twenty years the number of people using Irish on a daily basis to 250,000 from the current figure of 85,000 and to increase the total number of people with Irish to 2 million from the current figure of 1.6 million. It is hoped that the strategy paper will be finalised and published before the end of this year

### **2. British-Irish Council**

I am very much in favour of international collaboration in the area of language planning and development. My own department – the Department of Community, Rural

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<sup>1</sup> I am very pleased to join you today at EFNIL's Annual Conference and wish to express my thanks to EFNIL and the hosts, Foras na Gaeilge, for the invitation to speak. The theme of the conference, “The Relationship between Official National Languages and Regional and Minority Languages in Europe” is one that is broad, interesting, and, in my opinion, of considerable significance.

and Gaeltacht Affairs – plays an important and significant role in this regard. The department represents Ireland at the Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used Languages strand of the British-Irish Council (BIC) and also at the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD) which is a European-wide organisation.

The British-Irish Council was established under the terms of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement in 1998. The Council is made up of the various governments and administrations of Britain and Ireland, namely the Irish and British governments, the devolved assemblies of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. It has a number of areas of work including minority languages. The members of the Council are committed to collaborating, sharing best practices and learning from each other's experiences in a number of different areas with respect to language preservation and development. These areas include language transmission in the family, adult education, ICT, legislation and language promotion among young people.

### **3. Official Languages Act 2003**

I have already referred to cooperation and sharing of best practice as being one of the primary aims of the British-Irish Council. This cooperation and sharing is taking place in many policy areas, but, of particular interest to me and my department, is most notable in the area of language legislation. I know this from personal experience as the Minister responsible for the enactment of the Official Languages Act by the Irish Oireachtas in 2003. That Act is the first piece of legislation in Ireland that provides for an enhancement in the range and quality of services provided in the Irish language by public bodies. In preparing the Act back in the late 1990s and in the early years of the present decade, much was learnt from the provisions of the Welsh Language Act 1993. In particular, the model of the language schemes as a core element of the legislation was taken from the Welsh Act. A scheme is essentially a three year plan of action for the improvement of Irish language services provided by individual bodies to be agreed between me as Minister and the chief executive of the body concerned. I might add that lessons were also learned from further afield, in particular from Canada. The post of Irish language commissioner which was established under the Official Languages Act 2003 was modelled on the Canadian Languages Commissioner which was originally provided for in the Canadian Official Languages Act of 1969.

Scotland has followed in the footsteps of Wales and Ireland in enacting language legislation, namely the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. Indeed, Scotland chairs the sub-Group on legislation which forms part of the work of the British-Irish Council Group on Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used Languages. On a practical level a practitioner's workshop on language transmission in the family was held in Galway in 2006 and a further workshop on adult education took place in Wales in 2008. Both of these conferences proved very successful. By coincidence the next **BIC summit meeting**, which is being held in Jersey next week will have the area of Minority languages as its main theme.

#### **4. Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD)**

My department is also a **full and very active** member of the **Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD)** which has a wider geographical representation than the British-Irish Council. The Network was established at the end of 2007 with the aim of facilitating the sharing of best practice and the development of new and innovative ideas in the field of language planning amongst Europe's constitutional, regional and smaller-state languages. It is an interesting fact that some 50 million EU citizens, 10% of the EU population, speak a regional or minority language.

The NPLD comprises two levels of membership – full and associate members. Full members include Government Departments and Agencies from countries and regions such as Wales, Scotland, Galicia, Catalonia, Finland, Estonia, and Brittany. Ireland is represented on the Network by both my department and Foras na Gaeilge. The work of the NPLD has many similarities with that of the British-Irish Council. The NPLD is currently engaged in areas such as the media, youth and pre-school education and is planning to extend its range of work to cover ICT and Research.

#### **5. Críoch**

Mar fhocal scoir guím gach ráth ar obair na Comhdhála seo. Tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh tairbhe as an bplé agus go deimhin go mbeidh deis agaibh chomh maith blaiseadh a fháil ar Éireann i bpríomhchathair na tíre. Níl le déanamh agam anois ach a fhógairt go bhfuil An Chomhdháil oscailte go hoifigiúil.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In closing, I wish the Conference every success. I hope you benefit from the discussion and that you also get some sense of Ireland from visiting our capital city. I hereby declare the Conference officially open.

