

Public Attitudes to Gaelic: a comparison of surveys undertaken in 1981, 2003 and 2011

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1 Introduction

To date (July 2012) there have only been three major studies of public opinion in Scotland on the Gaelic language and related issues. The first was undertaken for An Comunn Gaidhealach in 1980/81 by the Hatfield Polytechnic School of Business and Social Sciences (MacKinnon 1981). The second was undertaken in 2003 for the BBC and Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba) by Market Research UK Ltd (MRUK 2003). The third was undertaken in 2011 by TNS-BMRB for the Scottish Government's Culture, External Affairs and Tourism Analytical Unit in conjunction with Bòrd na Gàidhlig (TNS-BMRB 2011).

The first survey was funded by a small grant from the Scottish Office Education Department (and the research funds of Hatfield Polytechnic). The second survey was commissioned by the BBC and the recently-created Gaelic development agency and non-governmental public board, Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba). Earlier studies of the national Gaelic audience for BBC Scotland in 1994 and 1996 had been carried out by BBC Broadcasting Research, Lèirsinn, System Three and Sgrùd Research, and had covered some similar ground, but were not in the public domain. The third and most recent study was funded by the Scottish Government Gaelic and Scots Languages Unit and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

These three studies are the principal sources on Scottish public opinion on Gaelic and related issues. The first two are separated by 22 years, and the first and last by 30 – a gap of a whole generation. The three studies were undertaken at times when the social climate and public provisions for Gaelic were markedly different. The 1981 study was undertaken before the influential Cor na Gàidhlig report of 1982¹ had brought about the new infrastructure of Gaelic organizations (CnaG, CNSA, CLÌ, PnE and a revised role for An Comunn), and at a time when attempts

¹ HIDB Gaelic Report Group (principal author: Martin Macdonald) 1982. Cor na Gàidhlig: Language, Community and Development. Inverness: Highlands and Islands Development Board.

to legislate for the language were being made (e.g. Donald Stewart's unsuccessful private member's bill of 1981). Donald Stewart indeed referred to the study's earlier findings in moving his bill.² The principal Gaelic development body at the time was An Comunn Gaidhealach, and it wanted some assessment of public opinion on current demands for provisions for Gaelic. Gaelic as a second language in primary education was being developed in Highland Region, in Argyll & Bute, and in the Bilingual Education Project in the Western Isles. There were demands for a Gaelic radio channel and improved output on television. There were also calls for more Gaelic in print and public signage. Issues of official recognition, and its greater use in national and local administration were being raised, and there were public campaigns regarding public signage, and justice for the language. The questionnaire therefore reflected these concerns.

With devolution, the structures which Cor na Gàidhlig had brought about had clearly served Gaelic and its speakers well, but a step change was needed to serve the times. In the wake of the Macpherson³, and Milne⁴ task

² Donald Stewart M.P. for Western Isles, moving his Gaelic Language (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (13/02/81): "I want to bring to the notice of the House a public opinion survey that was carried out in Perth at the time of the National Mod last October. The results are extremely interesting. The survey was conducted on scientific principles in homes and in shopping centres throughout the city, amongst all social classes, by two social science research workers from English polytechnics—Dr. Kenneth MacKinnon from Hatfield and Ms. Margaret Lamplough from Birmingham.

"A clear degree of support was evident for the official recognition of Gaelic and an improved place for the language in education and the mass media. Three-quarters of the citizens of Perth believed Gaelic to be 'a matter of importance to Scotland as a whole.' Apparently 77 per cent. felt that it should be recognised officially as a national language in Scotland and 88 per cent. believed that it should be encouraged to continue as a living tongue. Despite the climate of public expenditure cuts, 64 per cent. of all respondents agreed with the need for more public money to be provided in support of Gaelic.

"Even greater was the desire for Gaelic to be provided in the schools—in fact, 98 per cent. called for that. For adult education classes there was 88 per cent. support and for educational programmes on radio and television there was 83 per cent. support. Concerning the time allocated to Gaelic on radio and television generally, 56 per cent. of the respondents agreed that there should be more time for Gaelic in the media, and 9 per cent. "much more", although only 1 per cent. of the sample comprised native speakers and only 4 per cent. had any knowledge or ability to follow simple Gaelic.

"The report concluded: 'Gaelic was clearly seen as a national institution in the whole of Scotland. 81 per cent of the respondents disagreed with the statement that Gaelic should be confined to the Highlands and Islands area. The alleged detrimental effects stemming from Gaelic were clearly rejected by some 91 per cent. of the sample who did not agree with the statement that encouraging Gaelic would result in bad effects.' There is unmistakable evidence of a great resurgence in the support for and the use of Gaelic." (Hansard for 13th February 1981).

³ Taskforce on the Public Funding of Gaelic (The Macpherson Taskforce Report) 2000. *Ag Ath-Bheothachadh Gàidhlig — Neamhnuid Nàiseanta: Aithisg bho Buidheann-Gnìomh*

forces, MAGOG and the Meek Report⁵, the creation of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, recognition of Gaelic in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages⁶, and prospects of official recognition in legislation, there was clearly a new political climate and new opportunities for Gaelic. The BBC was developing new initiatives for the indigenous language-groups which it served, such as BBC Voices (MacKinnon 2004), and it needed to have some assessment of public attitudes upon which it could base its policies. Likewise the newly-created but then non-statutory Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba) wished to test public opinion on support for the language. The objectives of these two studies were thus distinctive and different, as they had come about for different reasons. However, both sought to assess public support for the language and policies to improve its place in public life, so some comparison of these studies is possible.

The most recent of these three studies in 2011, is currently being followed by a further study being undertaken at the University of Edinburgh, with support from ESRC, the Scottish Government and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, to examine Scottish public opinion on Gaelic. By this time Bòrd na Gàidhlig had been established in 2006 as a statutory body under the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act of 2005, and was involved with public authorities in making Gaelic language plans. The Gaelic Media Service had been reconstituted as MG Alba in 2008, and its dedicated Gaelic television channel had commenced broadcasting on 19th September 2008. Further developments in Gaelic Education were being taken forward. There was also a rising tide of criticism, verging on outright hostility and disparagement of the language, in particular press media (MacKinnon 2011). A new paradigm for Gaelic, and a backlash in specific quarters needed to be addressed by a properly conducted assessment of Scottish public opinion.

This review presents a summary of the three studies of public attitudes on Gaelic, focuses on the most recent, and attempts to assess how views have developed over the 30-year period which they cover.

Maoineachadh Poblach na Gàidhlig / Revitalising Gaelic — A National Asset: Report by the Taskforce on Public Funding of Gaelic. Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive.

⁴ Taskforce on Gaelic Broadcasting (chair: Alasdair Milne) 2000. Gaelic Broadcasting Task Force Report (Milne Report), Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

⁵ Ministerial Advisory Group on Gaelic (chair: Professor Donald Meek) 2002. A Fresh Start for Gaelic (Meek Report). Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

⁶ The UK Government signed the Charter in 2000, and Parliament ratified it in 2001.

2 Scottish Opinion on Gaelic 1981

A pilot study was carried out in Perth at the time of the 1980 National Mòd, and interviewing was then undertaken on the Isle of Skye over winter and spring 1980/81, reporting in April 1981. The main study was undertaken during summer 1981, and was analysed and reported in autumn 1981. A national sample of 1,117 respondents was structured by area, gender, age, and occupation. Contact was made by systematic sampling of electors in the Western Isles and Isle of Skye, and by quota-sampled street interviews in mainland Highland towns, and in the Lowland area. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions on attitudes toward Gaelic language, policy objectives and existing provisions for the language, with further questions on age, gender, occupation, politics, knowledge of Gaelic, and relationship to Gaelic speakers.

There was an expected relationship between measure of support for Gaelic and location. Attitudes were most favourable in the Western Isles, followed by Skye and Lochalsh, followed by remainder of mainland Highlands, and least in the Lowland area. Similar differences resulted from extent of ability to speak Gaelic – and also interestingly whether or not the respondent was related to a Gaelic speaker. Nevertheless, the attitudes towards Gaelic in public life, education and the media were on the whole moderately favourable, and in some respects very supportive – even in Lowland contexts:

- A clear majority favoured official recognition: 54% (or 67% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.), and
- There was strong support for the encouragement of Gaelic throughout Scotland: 49% (or 64% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.)
- For more television and radio time for Gaelic, 47% were in favour (or 71% excluding ‘don’t knows’, etc.)
- Opinions were more definite regarding availability of Gaelic in schools throughout Scotland: 70% (or 82% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.)
- Some 24% welcomed more opportunities to learn Gaelic (or 37% excluding ‘don’t knows’, etc.)
- Some 41% agreed that Gaelic was important for the Scottish people as a whole (or 50% excluding ‘don’t knows’, etc.)

The ‘no response’, ‘no feelings either way’, and ‘don’t know’ categories could sometimes be substantial (e.g. 54% were indifferent on more press encouragement, 44% on more Gaelic-speakers for public posts, and 38% on Gaelic on public signs), thus indicating that on some issues the idea was being raised in the respondent’s awareness for the first time. In general however, these various non-responding categories were for the most part quite moderate. Their elimination generally resulted in clear majorities in favour of improved provisions for Gaelic even amongst non-speakers and Lowland residents. The results indicated overall a marked balance of opinion favourable towards Gaelic and provisions for it in education, the media, public life and administration. The overwhelming antipathy towards Gaelic, of which the general public and Lowlanders in particular had often been accused, was quite definitely not at all the case, or if so it was confined to a rather small minority. The commissioning organisation might have made a great deal more of these conclusions.

The 1981 survey results were capable of a great deal more analysis – and opportunity was taken to do this. On three salient questions (official recognition, more public money, and more broadcasting time) further analysis was undertaken in terms of area of survey, gender, age, occupational class, and voting intention. On official recognition women proved the more supportive, and on more broadcasting time, men and younger respondents generally were found to be more supportive. There were significant differences between occupational groups on funding, with least support amongst the semi- and unskilled workers in the Lowlands, the unclassified and skilled non-manual groups in the Highlands, and the professional and managerial group in the Western Isles (which last group contained many incomers). Considerable differences arose out of voting intention. In almost every case SNP voters were most supportive, followed by Liberals and SDP, Labour was intermediate, and Conservatives and those with no clear voting intention evidenced least support of all. The most distinguishing differences arose out of extent of ability to speak Gaelic. Non-native fluent speakers were most supportive of all, and even minimal abilities rated very highly. This is within expectation – but high levels of support were also forthcoming for those with a Gaelic-speaking relative.

Ten questions and their results on a five-point scale were used to construct a ‘Gaelic support-score’, which was scaled up to a range of +100 through zero to –100 points. This value was cross-tabulated with the factors for area, age, gender, occupational class and voting intention. The data were sufficiently robust to enable fairly extensive statistical analysis to be

undertaken. Details of personal factors for each area and overall enabled a fairly detailed analysis to be undertaken. The results for the Lowland area, as representative of opinion outwith the Gaidhealtachd, indicated:

- most support for Gaelic amongst professional and managerial respondents (at +22 points, compared with +14 for all others), and
- the least supportive the semi- and unskilled manual workers (+3 points, compared with +19 for all others).
- Females were more supportive (+18 overall) than males (at +13)
- Most supportive amongst the females were skilled manual workers (+29 points), and least the semi- and unskilled workers (+3 points)
- The most salient differences arose from voting intentions: SNP +36; Liberal and SDP +18; Labour +16; no clear voting intention +9, and Conservative +2 points respectively.

Perhaps the most striking differences arose from Gaelic speaking ability. All levels of ability averaged +52 points, no knowledge registered +14, and non-respondents on this question registered –18 (the only actual negative score in this analysis).

More qualitative data were extracted on respondents' own comments on questions relating to policies and measures in support of Gaelic, which produced quite a wealth of vernacular and pithy comment. It was possible to code these open-ended responses into broadly antipathetic: 13.2% of respondents; indifferent: 34.1%; no response: 17.0%; supportive: 26.8%; and an unprompted 8.9% who said with wider encouragement of the language that they would learn it. Question 8 had specifically raised the issue whether the respondent would personally welcome more opportunities for adult education in Gaelic. Overall some 24% of the sample answered yes to this question.

The study concluded with a call for a follow-up study, and the observation that public discussion of Gaelic had hitherto been conducted typically in terms of assertions, assumptions and anecdotal impressions. It should no longer be possible to sustain such arguments without a body of objectively and scientifically attestable evidence.

3 Attitudes to the Gaelic Language 2003

This study, which was commissioned by BBC and Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba), was undertaken by MRUK early in August 2003. A national sample of 1,020 was interviewed, using a random selection of households, and quota-sampled for area, age, and gender. Methodology was thus similar to the earlier study, except that political support was not asked. However there were indications that details on occupation were sought, and were taken into account in the survey. The objectives stemmed from BBC policies to enhance its service for UK indigenous languages (in the run-up to BBC Voices, 2004), and to attract new learners of these languages, and Gaelic in particular in this case. Many of the questions reflected this objective, and relatively few were on similar lines to the 1981 study. What few there were, were sufficiently similar to enable comparison to be made. Moreover, Bòrd na Gàidhlig needed to know at this initial stage in the formulation of a National Plan for Gaelic what were the general attitudes towards the language.

In terms of knowledge of Gaelic, some 13% of the respondents reported varying levels of ability, and 87% with none. This basic question compared closely with the 1981 results of 12% and 88% respectively. This strongly suggests that the two studies are valid, and may be reliably compared on other factors also.

The 2003 study examined a number of ‘attitudes towards maintenance and development of Gaelic’. Both surveys had a similar question on whether Gaelic should be made available in schools throughout Scotland for those who wish to learn the language. In 2003 87% agreed with this (92% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.), and in 1981 70% (82% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.) This has been a well-ventilated public issue in recent years, and public discussion may have raised its profile and levels of support. However the questions were not completely identical and there were some differences in research methodology, so too much should not be made of this, beyond saying that it appears suggestive.

The 2003 study had a question on more opportunities for people to learn Gaelic across Scotland. This resembled a 1981 question on whether respondents would welcome more opportunities for adult education in Gaelic. The 2003 results produced 71% for more opportunities (77% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.). In comparison, the 1981 results had produced some 24% in favour (37% eliminating ‘don’t knows’, etc.) Again, not too much can be made of this – but there may have been some

movement of public opinion as Gaelic issues gained more prominence in the public mind over this period.

There were broadly similar questions on whether Gaelic is important in Scottish life. In 2003 66% assented (72% if 'don't knows', etc. are eliminated). In 1981 this had been assented by 41% (49% eliminating 'don't knows', etc.) Again, this is suggestive that public opinion may have moved further in support of Gaelic over this 22 year period.

The 2003 study also presented a graphical table on the 'perceived importance of the maintenance and development of Scottish Gaelic'. It is not clear whether this results from a specific single question, or whether it is an aggregate of responses to the 8 questions on these issues. If so, some comparison might be made with the 'Gaelic support-score' analysis of the 1981 study, which was based on 10 questions on similar issues. If so, general support for Gaelic was evidenced as important, or very important by 68% of the 2003 sample (82% eliminating the 'don't knows', etc.). The 1981 analysis produced mean Gaelic-support scores of +70 for respondents in the Western Isles, +36 for Skye, +34 for the mainland Highlands, +16 for the Lowland area, and an overall mean of +24 nationally. The 2003 results are showing rather higher levels of support for Gaelic nationally, but the very different methodologies on this score means that direct comparison is not really possible.

The 2003 survey asked whether respondents would consider learning Gaelic in the near future. Some 16% said 'yes', and a further 16% said 'maybe'. In 1981 a similar question elicited some 24% who said they would welcome further adult education facilities to learn Gaelic, and a separate, open-ended question elicited an unprompted 9% who said they would learn Gaelic if the language were more widely encouraged.

The 2003 study explored some further attitudinal questions (with totals assenting in brackets) on:

- whether school pupils should learn about Celtic and Gaelic heritage (76% assenting),
- bilingual and Gaelic-medium education being promoted and expanded (64%),
- more Scottish people attempting to learn Gaelic (59%),
- learning Gaelic not being of great value or use (43%), and
- ease of finding Gaelic courses (31%).

There were no corresponding questions to the 1981 questions (with totals assenting in brackets) on:

- official recognition (54% assenting in 1981),
- availability of public funding (46%),
- use of Gaelic with public authorities (41%),
- appointment of Gaelic speakers to posts dealing with the public in Gaelic areas (43%),
- more radio and television time for Gaelic learners (47%),
- whether respondent had seen or heard Gaelic programmes (82%),
- whether there should be more broadcasting time for Gaelic (39%),
- noticing Gaelic in the press (12%), and
- whether more should be provided (32%),
- Gaelic on public signs and notices (42%), and
- whether family members spoke Gaelic (15%).

It would have been valuable to have had some at least of these issues explored, if only to have provided further continuity of approach, especially in cases where the issues were still current. However, the 2011 survey did question respondents on some of these topics, e.g. whether school pupils should learn about Scottish heritage (with 90% assenting in 2011); whether Gaelic programmes had been seen or heard on radio (10%) and television (32%).

In 2003 with impending legislation, official recognition / ‘secure status’ was clearly one such issue. So were levels of public funding, use with official bodies, and public signage. The inclusion of a question on support for various levels of Gaelic broadcasting time would have been useful (and thus a comparison with 1981 possible).

On the other hand the 2003 survey did ask questions on:

- Likelihood of respondents learning Gaelic in near future; or
- Reason for not being interested;
- Situations whereby knowledge of Gaelic is used;
- Whether individuals have tried to learn Gaelic, but stopped;
- Reasons why individuals stopped;
- Future interest in learning Gaelic;
- Preferred level of fluency;

- Preferred methods of learning;
- Access to media forms; and
- Frequency of use;
- Frequency of listening to Radio Scotland; and
- Frequency of listening to Radio nan Gàidheal (but surprisingly not in detail of the 131 specifically Gaelic speakers / users.)
- Speakers of languages other than English or Gaelic.

4 Some further comparisons between the 2003 and 1981 studies

The 1981 study clearly indicated moderately supportive views towards the language and measures then being undertaken in its support. In some cases, such as availability of Gaelic in schools this was quite high. Differences of opinions associated with such social factors as age, gender, occupation and voting intention were examined on three specific questions (official recognition, more resources, and more broadcasting time for Gaelic), and also on an aggregate ‘Gaelic support score’ based on responses to ten questions.

In the 1981 study, on official recognition there were no significant differences by age, but women were significantly more supportive than men. (59% as against 49% nationally). There were no significant differences by occupation – but in terms of respondents’ politics SNP sympathisers were most supportive (73%), followed by Liberals and SDP (57%), Labour (53%), likely non-voters (47%) and Conservatives (46%).

On further resources for Gaelic there were no significant differences by age or gender. However, in terms of occupation, the semi- and unskilled workers were least supportive in the Lowland area. In the mainland Highlands the skilled manual and unclassified groups were the least supportive, and in the Western Isles the professional and managerial group. There were significant differences by voting intention, similarly patterned to the recognition question.

On more airtime for Gaelic there were no significant differences by age in the Highland and Island samples, but in the Lowlands under 45s were significantly more supportive. Males were significantly more supportive in the Lowland sample – otherwise age differences were not significant. Overall occupational differences were not significant (except in Western Isles where professionals and managerials were marginally, albeit significantly, less supportive. Political support was similarly patterned as above.

In terms of general support on the ten questions, no significant differences arose overall from age, gender or occupation. Voting intention however was similarly patterned as above (except that in Skye Liberals were the most supportive).

The 2003 study found that positive attitudes were strongest amongst over-30 age-groups, perhaps indicating that public opinion had shifted since 1981, with a new generation not having the levels of support of earlier generations. Similarly socio-economic groups AB/C1 were more supportive than C2/D/Es, which was broadly in line with earlier findings.

The question on Gaelic being of no great value or use in contemporary society in 2003 was agreed by 43% but with a large undecided response of 28%. Similar questions had been asked in other Gaelic area and Gaelic speaker surveys – but not of the general population in the 1981 attitude survey.

However 68% supported the maintenance and development of Gaelic, which indicated some advance on the responses in 1981 on the importance of Gaelic (41%), provision of greater resources for Gaelic (46%), and its encouragement in Scotland as a whole (49%). (In 2011 a question on ‘reasonable support for Gaelic usage in Scotland’ elicited 51% in favour, and a question on whether respondents ‘would like more Gaelic’ 52% were in favour.)

In 2003 some 97% claimed never to listen to Radio nan Gàidheal, which was hardly surprising – but only 48% claimed ever to listen to Radio Scotland (which may be). Some further questions to the 3% of the sample who were Radio nan Gàidheal listeners (which may indicate some 31 respondents), and some further analysis of the 131 with any knowledge of Gaelic in the sample might have been useful. However 46% of these claimed never to use the language, and only 19% to listen to Gaelic radio, and 6% to watch Gaelic television programmes.

There was some more detailed examination of learners who had ceased (a quarter of the non-fluent Gaelic cases) – and reasons why. This represented a challenge to initiatives for acquisition planning, and a clear indication of the need for further research in advance of any future campaigns. But the hard-core 9% who said they would learn Gaelic in 1981 and the 16% of 2003 respondents who were ‘definites’ on this issue, and the 16% ‘maybes’, perhaps indicate that numbers of potential learners may have increased over 22 years.

The 2003 ‘key findings’ on possession of radio (98%), television (99%), mobile (61%), PC (53%) and internet (48%) facilities indicate media

on which learning strategies can be developed. (The results could also validate the sample, or be confirmed, from other studies.) However, over half those considering learning Gaelic (52%) preferred evening classes.

The statement that ‘More Scottish people should attempt to learn Gaelic’ was assented by 59% of the sample. It deserved to be followed by a question, ‘and would you?’ It was though followed by a question on ‘Learning Gaelic is not of great value in today’s society as there is seldom the need or opportunity to use it.’ Some 43% assented, and some 30% disagreed. The question might better have been broken into two – there are other reasons affecting the learning of Gaelic than those suggested here.

5 Recommendations following the 2003 study

It would be worthwhile continually to monitor Scottish opinion on Gaelic and to ask some similar questions to those in the two previous studies, e.g. from the 1981 survey:

- Do you think that Gaelic is important for the Scottish people as a whole?
- Do you think that Gaelic should be officially recognised?
- Should more resources be used for Gaelic language and culture?
- Should Gaelic be encouraged for use with public authorities?
- Should Gaelic be encouraged throughout Scotland or only in Highlands and Islands?

And from the 2003 survey, including some similarly worded questions to the 1981 study:

- School pupils who wish to do so should be able to learn Gaelic at school.
- All school pupils should learn about Celtic and Gaelic heritage.
- There should be more opportunities for people to learn Gaelic across Scotland.
- Gaelic is an important part of Scottish life and needs to be promoted.
- Bilingual and Gaelic-medium education should be promoted and expanded

The 1981 study called for a follow-up, which was not immediately forthcoming. A follow-up study of the 2003 survey could monitor such

earlier questions as the above, and might further explore the motivations and likelihood of potential learners. There is also a need for more penetrative attitudinal research on people's perceptions and feelings about Gaelic. This is particularly important in the case of actual Gaelic-speakers, especially those with families, and those likely to have them. We need to know what turns people on to using Gaelic – and what turns them off. At present (2011) we still know neither, and need to do so urgently.

6 Public Attitudes towards the Gaelic Language 2011

This study, which was commissioned and funded by the Scottish Government's Gaelic and Scots Language Unit and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, was undertaken in March 2011 with a national sample of 1,009 adults aged 16 years and over. Interviewing was carried out in 61 of Scotland's 72 parliamentary constituencies, and was quota-sampled in terms of sex, age, employment status and socio-economic group. A 'boost' sample was also undertaken in the more strongly Gaelic areas of the Western Isles, Skye, and Lochalsh. This enabled a more reliable sample of Gaelic speakers and users to augment those identified in the main survey, together totalling 96 respondents. Methodology was thus broadly in line with the two previous studies, the 2011 'boost' survey especially on similar lines to specific Gaelic area sampling and weighting in the 1981 study.

The principal objectives were to obtain views on Gaelic, extent of awareness and knowledge of the language, usage and support for developments, role and relevance of the language, especially in education.

7 Summary of the principal findings of the 2011 report

- Some 80% of the respondents were aware of Gaelic in various situations of public and social life;
- Reasonable proportions watch Gaelic television (32%), radio (10%), and listen to Gaelic music (14%);
- Some 13% claimed some knowledge of Gaelic, including 2% fluent (with identical findings in 2003, and closely similar 12%, 2% in 1981);
- Some 72% of fluent speakers use it a lot or fairly often, 20% occasionally, and 8% rarely or never. Mostly with friends (21%) and family (64%), but only 9% at work, and 2% out and about, shopping, etc. (26% in social situations in 2003);
- Some 14% of fluent speakers indicated nothing would encourage them to use Gaelic more, and 50% of the general sample indicated that nothing would encourage them to learn it.

- Awareness of employment opportunities for Gaelic was low, apart from teaching at 40%, and television at 26%.
- There was ‘reasonable support for Gaelic usage in Scotland’ at 51% (with 38% indifferent), compared with 1981 levels of 54% (19% indifferent) for official recognition, 42% (16%) for more public funding, 42% (38%) for public signage, and 47% (33%) for more media time.
- Half (52%) would like ‘more Gaelic’ used in Scotland today, with 15% ‘less’. Some 62% supported the encouragement of Gaelic throughout Scotland, and 65% agreed more should be done to encourage and promote Gaelic in Scotland.
- Some 40% regarded Gaelic as important to their sense of national identity, but far less to local identity (23%), and personal identity (21%).
- Substantial proportions agreed that it was important that Scotland did not lose its Gaelic language traditions (81%), and that it was an important part of Scottish culture (79%).
- In view of this it was surprising that the study reported on p. 41 that 62% supported the view that Gaelic should be supported and encouraged throughout Scotland, but also that 63% were reported as seeing Gaelic as only relevant in areas like the Western Isles. However, on another question 9% disagreed that ‘Gaelic is not relevant in Scotland today’ – with 84% taking the contrary view, namely that it was.) In 1981 49% of the national sample agreed that Gaelic should be encouraged throughout Scotland.
- However only 26% of the 2011 sample regarded Gaelic as not relevant to Scotland today.
- Increased usage for Gaelic in the media was only supported by 23% (In 1981 47% supported more Gaelic in radio and television, and 32% in the press.)
- Support for Gaelic in the schools was strong at 62% (compared with 70% in 1981).
- However, awareness of Gaelic education provisions in respondents’ own local areas was low – with 69% not aware of any local provision.
- Support for Scottish Studies (including language) was high at 90%, for availability of Gaelic as a subject likewise at 86%, although support for more subjects taught in Gaelic was lower at

43%. (Had the question probed for Gaelic-medium Education provision the response might have been different.)

- Some 30% would welcome more Gaelic adult education classes (compared with 24% personally welcoming such in 1981).

8 General conclusions of the 2011 survey

- Awareness of Gaelic usage was reported as high, mainly driven by the media, but also by the arts and education.
- Findings of those with Gaelic abilities, Highland (and especially West Highland) location were markedly higher in support of Gaelic and were contrasted with other, Lowland residents.
- Demand for Gaelic acquisition was low – but schools were seen as highly appropriate for Gaelic studies.
- Overall demand for Gaelic was seen as ‘moderate’, but most respondents acknowledged the importance of Gaelic in cultural and identity terms.
- There was no substantial opposition towards the Gaelic language or measures supporting it (much as the 1981 survey had concluded), but a significant minority (around 40%) was uncommitted either way.
- The highest levels of support were for Gaelic in education, albeit with questionable results for Gaelic as a teaching medium.

9 Overall Conclusions

Although the methodologies of these three public opinion studies on Gaelic were sufficiently similar for comparisons to be reasonably valid, the principal difficulty stems from their various objectives and choice of questions. Relatively few questions were sufficiently similar in wording to be capable of direct comparison. This was affected also by the structure of the questionnaires and the various ways in which similar questions were embedded amongst others.

The 2011 study cautiously concluded that ‘the overall situation for the Gaelic language could best be described as moderate.’ This might well go for the review of the three studies over time. Some of the comparisons noted below do give some grounds for believing that public opinion in support of Gaelic has strengthened over a 30-year period. This appears to be the case on such issues as:

- The importance of Gaelic to the Scottish people and Scottish Culture
(regarded as very / important to 41% in 1981, 68% in 2003, and 78% in 2011.)
- Gaelic as important or relevant in Scotland nationally (as contrasted with only in Highlands and Islands.)
(regarded as relevant nationally by 70% in 1981, 87% in 2003, and 86% in 2011.)
- Availability of Gaelic in schools studies throughout Scotland
(regarded as very / important to 49% in 1981, 66% in 2003, and 63% in 2011.)

These questions were sufficiently similar to justify direct comparison (more or less) and are featured in the accompanying illustrations. In addition there were questions on further opportunities to learn Gaelic, and in particular respondents' responses on their own likelihood of taking up opportunities to acquire Gaelic in:

- Adult education (which is therefore also featured graphically.)

There were also questions in two of the studies on each of the following questions, and these also feature in the illustrations:-

- Gaelic / Scottish / Celtic heritage in school studies;
- Bilingual / Gaelic-medium education / Gaelic as a teaching medium;
- Maintenance and development of Gaelic;
- Gaelic as of no great value.

These limited possibilities for comparison draw attention to the importance of continuity of comparable questions between such studies over time. It was welcome that there were such possibilities for comparison between these three studies, but more opportunity would have been very useful. Had there been, say eight such questions with identical or sufficiently close wording in each of the three studies, a useful longitudinal study of changing public opinion on Gaelic issues would have been possible. For this reason it is strongly recommended that such similarities of question be incorporated in any future study of public attitudes on Gaelic.

The 1981 study asked respondents concerning their political orientations (in terms of political party they felt closest to.) This enabled analysis of the results in terms of political support. This is a valuable perspective in terms of policymaking, and it was a pity that subsequent surveys did not question respondents on this.

Follow-up studies were recommended by both the 1981 and 2011 studies, and it is also strongly recommended that such follow-up studies should be undertaken at more frequent intervals than 22 or 8 years. A further major study of public attitudes to Gaelic commenced in 2012 by University of Edinburgh (Celtic and Scottish Studies, Social and Political Science) and ScotCen Social Research, with ESRC funding and support from the Scottish Government, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and the Soillse⁷ research project. Its preliminary results⁸ have so far proved to be broadly in line with the earlier studies reviewed here. For example, in the randomly-selected national sample of 1,229 over-18s, 86% saw Gaelic as being an important part of Highland and Island heritage, and 76% as important for Scottish heritage. Regarding Gaelic medium education, 48% of respondents said that parents anywhere in Scotland should have the right to send their child to a Gaelic-medium school, and a further 43% said parents should have this right in areas where Gaelic is spoken.

The study was based upon questions on attitudes to Gaelic in a recent Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. It would be very useful if questions on Gaelic could feature at suitable regular intervals on Scottish Government public opinion (omnibus) surveys. Bòrd na Gàidhlig is required regularly to monitor the effects of its policies, and such questions on government social surveys would be highly useful and relevant, especially if these could include a standard set of questions on Gaelic and related policies as a performance indicator. Such provision might have been more specifically indicated in the forthcoming National Plan for Gaelic 2012-17.

There is also a need for more penetrative attitudinal research on motives to acquire and use Gaelic, and to transmit it within the family, but this would need its own separately-structured and special study.

⁷ For preliminary findings of the Public Attitudes to Gaelic study, see Soillse Research Digest 3 at http://www.soillse.ac.uk/downloads/soillseresearchdigest3_1.pdf

⁸ Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2012. National Gaelic Language Plan 2012 | 2017 Inverness: Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

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