

Statement from
Dr Henry Leperlier
Conseiller consulaire à l'Assemblée des Français de l'étranger
Membre de la commission de sécurité
<http://www.assemblee-afe.fr/leperlier.html?type=cc>

Intervention on Panel 3

I want to thank first the organizers and especially the UNPO volunteers who, I heard yesterday, came here at 7:00am. You're doing a fantastic job.

My name is Henry Leperlier and I have done research in language rights and language planning in Canada, China, Taiwan, Singapore mainly. I'm a dual citizen. I'm Irish and I'm French. I'm talking today as an Irish citizen but I'm also an Irish speaker; I'm also a Breton speaker)

I used to work as a translator with the European Bureau for Lesser used languages.

I will start by telling you about the situation of the Irish language as defined in Article 8 of the **Irish Constitution**; an article that aims to protect the Irish language
It states:

ARTICLE 8

1 The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.

2 The English language is recognised as a second official language.

3 Provision may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof.

The implications are that you can choose to use *Only English* even when you talk about Irish and promote Irish: you can do it all in English.

It leads to some dubious practices for example school principals and teachers in Irish schools (and by Irish schools I mean Irish medium schools) avoid communicating in Irish with the Department of Education because they know that if they do it in Irish they will have problems.

The same practices are common in all sectors of our society. For example, in radio stations in Irish and the Irish-language TV station TG4, the tax office for Irish speakers called "Aonad 88" which means Unit 88 (but only available two half days a week now as one is told in English).

When **Ráidió na Gaeltachta** (the National Irish language Radio network) needs technical help from Dublin Headquarters, a technician comes to fix the equipment in the studio in Dublin or in the Gaeltacht (so-called Irish-speaking regions).

RTÉ headquarters systematically send an English speaker who cannot speak at all in Irish and is not interested anyway in the language. They have no procedure in place to send a technician with Irish language ability.

It means that the Irish language even in Irish schools is a sort of a private tool that you only use with other fellow Irish speakers. The sort of the secret “sign” to recognise each other.

I will also mention the instance when a TV broadcaster, Manchán Magan made a series of programmes, *No Béarla (= No English)* in which he decided to tour Ireland using only Irish; it was done in a very humorous fashion and can be viewed on YouTube.

Many people apologized saying their French or German was really bad.

They couldn't recognize that the broadcaster was speaking Irish.

Another example: we have well over 50 Irish schools (Irish medium schools) in the Dublin region. But if you interview Irish people from Dublin, they will tell you that there are only five or six Irish schools in the Dublin region.

We, Irish speakers, have become invisible / inaudible people, who will lower their voices when using Irish making sure we're not heard. We keep a very low profile; when we use Irish and speak of ourselves, we often use the word *Irish speaker* in English. We don't even use the word *Gaeilgeoir* which is the proper word because *Gaeilgeoir* is frequently used in English as a derogatory term to stigmatize so-called speakers of Irish; meaning you're a fanatic or extremist about the Irish language.

People who are against Irish are always visible in many forums and complain that the language is being shoved down their throats:

It's not, because if it was, the complainers would all be fluent in Irish. I am fairly certain the same is valid for most minorities.

The consequence is that parents who want their children to really know well Irish send their children to Irish schools. This is compounded by the fact that the teaching of Irish as a second language is often deficient.

School Enrollment: Should you make the decision to **enroll** your children in an Irish school you will have to deal with the inherited situation that most schools in Ireland are controlled by the Catholic Church.

There is nothing wrong with that, please don't misunderstand me, but the Church does control admission lists and often tends to favour Catholics (in spite of repeated denials in the press). I have then become a godfather (I'm a non-believer) because our friends (also non-believers), who wanted to ensure a better place for their child in the waiting list in their area, had their children baptized. We went through a sham ceremony.

Concerning **usage** of the Irish language in schools. Research was done in the 1980s (I couldn't locate any comprehensive recent research, the *Institiúid Teangeolaíochta na hÉireann* doing research on the Irish languages was [closed by the Government](#) after it found that 30% of parents wanted their children in Irish schools) but in the 1980s it was found that less than 50 percent of parents who send their children to Irish schools don't speak Irish at

all at home or might use the odd word “hello,” “how are you” in Irish. Such a token use of Irish feeds a negative image of the language; it means Irish becomes just a game. Only between 15 and 20 % of homes that send their children to our schools and continue speaking the language at home are families where both parents speak Irish. Contrary to prevailing public opinion the Irish Department of Education is not particularly pro-active about the opening of new Irish Schools. It opens far more English schools in Irish schools.

Inside sources in the department utter the opinion that the Department of Education does not believe in the future of Irish. They don't want to be accused later to have opened too many Irish schools and have to close them down later on.

Textbooks are often outdated because they are translations from English and are sometimes published at the same time a new edition comes out in English. Many secondary school teachers in Irish schools told me they prefer to use the (more recent) English edition.

In conclusion it's not that all negative: enrollment numbers are going up all the time. The question is whether it will lead to a rise in language use in public life, spoken and written.

This short description only deals with the 26 counties in the south. The situation is very different in Northern Ireland. You will have heard about Brexit and the Good Friday agreement. It covers specific provision for the Irish language situation and would necessitate another statement.

There is a third language in Ireland called **Shelta**, the language spoken by *Irish travellers* (roughly the Irish equivalent of the Roma people but probably of a different origin). Shelta is not covered at all legally or in the school system or by any law.

Recommendation: I recommend that we the speakers of minorized languages have a Language Commissioner to represent us at EU level.

Thank you very much.