

Irish language in Northern Ireland sees popular revival amid political controversy

Young people attend Irish language school and communities use language to rebuild their economies

By Don Duncan, [CBC News](#) Posted: Dec 02, 2017 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Dec 02, 2017 9:24 PM ET

While a political crisis drags on over whether Irish should be enshrined alongside English as an official language of Northern Ireland, the language itself is undergoing a renaissance.

Nationalist politicians, led by Sinn Fein, want official status to be granted to the language in the form of an Irish Language Act. Unionists, represented by the Democratic Unionist Party, refuse to concede, saying it would erode the "British" character of Northern Ireland.

The Legislative Assembly, in which Nationalists and Unionists are supposed to share power, hasn't sat for 11 months amid the political impasse.

Meanwhile, down in the streets, the Irish language is thriving. According to the most recent census, in 2011, some 11 per cent of the total population can speak Irish to varying degrees, an increase of one percentage point on the previous census.

The language's new dynamism, however, is most apparent in the educational sector. Since 1998, when the 30-year conflict known as the "Troubles" ended, the number of Irish immersion schools in Northern Ireland has grown from 39 to 92, catering to some 6,300 students today.

High schooler Caoimhe Dillon is one of them. On a recent morning in Maghera, a town 40 kilometres west of Belfast, Dillon browsed stalls at a careers fair that focused on job opportunities that involve the Irish language — media work, translation work, teaching and openings in the EU, to name a few.

"[Irish] will be very useful in my life because there are so many jobs out there for people who do Irish," she said.

The cradle of Irish-language revival

The Irish immersion school movement in Northern Ireland started during the "Troubles," when the first such school was built in 1971, entirely funded and run by the Nationalist community of West Belfast, the cradle of the Irish language revival in Northern Ireland.

Two years previously, that community had created the first modern urban *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area) as civil violence and discord exploded across the province. It was a time of much difficulty, said Jake MacSiacais, a resident of West Belfast, but he believes that hardship paved the way for later successes.

"If we hadn't have had it so hard, we would never have it so good," said MacSiacais, who is also director of Forbairt Feirste, a local organization that fosters economic development in West Belfast, using Irish.

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which ended the "Troubles," the Irish language has met with relatively improved conditions. More funding and support are available, but access to them is precarious, dependent on which political party — Nationalist or Unionist — holds the reins at ministerial level or on local council level in any given district.

Urban regeneration linked to language

Limited funding for the language has also been made possible through Foras na Gaeilge, a cross-border language promotion body established as part of the peace process.

This slight improvement in things, post-conflict, has enabled Forbairt Feirste and other organizations to bring about urban regeneration along the once very run-down and deprived Falls Road area in West

Belfast.

The Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, a large cultural centre opened in 1991, is the core of the regeneration. It houses a vibrant café, bookshop, gallery, and performance space as well as several units used to incubate start-up business. Once those businesses find their feet, they often move to more deprived areas further down the Falls Road so as to bring about development and employment there.

'Our immediate goal must be economic self-sufficiency because you cannot do anything unless you have resources' - *Liam Ó Flannagáin, co-founder of Carn Tóchair*

This "Irish-as-community regeneration" model is also in evidence elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Carn Tóchair, a small Irish-speaking community about 65 kilometres west of Belfast, is a good rural example of what has already been achieved in the urban context of West Belfast. Carn Tóchair, which means "stony causeway" in English, was established in the mid-'90s by a group of Irish speakers who have since been building it up as a hub of Irish-language activity.

The community now has a post office, in which you can do your business in Irish or English, as well as an Irish-language cultural centre, a kindergarten and a primary school. It even has small wind farm, a project developed to create more income for the community.

Innovative approaches to funding

"Our immediate goal must be economic self-sufficiency because you cannot do anything unless you have resources," says Liam Ó Flannagáin, co-founder of Carn Tóchair. "So far, though, we have been able to get by, by getting a pot of money here and there."

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- [Northern Ireland parties at an impasse, creating headaches for Britain](#)

Getting such "pots of money" for Irish language-only projects is a tough sell to fund administrators uninterested or ideologically opposed to the Irish language, says Ó Flannagáin. Carn Tóchair has therefore had to take a leaf out of West Belfast's playbook and get innovative with its fundraising approach.

Carn Tóchair has learned to wrap its Irish-language ambitions into projects that fall into funding categories such as youth engagement, eco-business and adult education. Ó Flannagáin sees it as Irish language with the bonus of community development.

In Unionist East Belfast, the bonus is nothing less than peace and reconciliation.

In what is perhaps the most unexpected development in the Irish language's recent evolution in Northern Ireland, Unionists in East Belfast started to learn the language.

'The Irish language is the perfect medium for reconciliation' - *Linda Ervine, East Belfast Mission*

It all began in 2011 with just one weekly class at East Belfast Mission, a community centre in the largely Unionist eastern part of the city. Since then, classes have ballooned to 13 classes per week, with a total of 170 students.

"I'm from a Presbyterian background which, of course, has historical links with Scotland," says Ivor McKeown, a Unionist student of Irish at East Belfast Mission. "I quite like the idea of bringing the Irish and Scottish culture together with my Presbyterian background."

Language a key to peace process

Unionists like McKeown no longer view the Irish language as antithetical to Britishness, but rather as integral to it – a part of the continuum of Celtic languages that includes Scottish Gaelic and Welsh which, together, contribute to the linguistic diversity of Britain.

This kind of logic flies in the face of the current divisive discourse surrounding the language in Northern Ireland's political sphere.


As the classes at East Belfast Mission grew, so too did the diversity of the students attending. The student body moved from a near totality of Unionist students in the beginning to a mix today of about 65 per cent Unionist and 35 per cent Nationalist.

Many of the Nationalists in the classes hail from Short Strand, a small Nationalist enclave ensconced in largely Unionist East Belfast. Their enclave is still segregated from the rest of East Belfast by high, so-called "peace" walls, which at once serve as obstacles to inter-religious violence and as barriers to post-conflict reconciliation.

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In its small way, the growing diversity at East Belfast Mission's Irish classes is helping to break down those barriers.

"For us, it has been a journey, a journey into the language but it's also turned out to be a journey of healing because it brings people together," says Linda Ervine, the Irish language development officer at East Belfast Mission. "The Irish language is the perfect medium for reconciliation."

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