Community of Contested Discourse in the Gaelic Development Debate

By **Alastair McIntosh**

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The editor of Bella Caledonia contacted me at the end of last week about a vigorous debate around "Gaelic" in relation to the *Gàidhealtachd*, and with the *Gàidhealtachd* referring to the grounding in which the Gaelic language – and a great deal more – might be said to live, and move, and have its being.

He made the following request. "I wondered if you would consider writing something for Bella that might act as a salve/bridge to the two sides that seem irreconcilable? My thinking is that there are good and well-meaning people on both sides. They should be united in gaining more funds to properly support Gaelic."

The debate as I understand it – what's come to be known as the Gaelic Development Debate, boils down to asking: *what is "Gaelic"?* At the risk of over-simplification, is it a linguistic identifier, a global network of people who have either been born into or chosen to learn the language? Or is it a wider cultural reality, rooted in communities of specific place, to which language is an important but not the only strand in a web of markers of identity and belonging?

The *Scottish Affairs* Special Issue

I can only sketch the surface of the debate's deep archaeology. In May 2021, the journal *Scottish Affairs* ran a special issue (30:2) on "Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* Futures", guest-edited by two scholars from the Isle of Skye: Dr James Oliver and Dr Iain MacKinnon. It explored meanings of "the *Gàidhealtachd"* as "the place of the *Gàidheil* (Gael)". Note the emphasis on *place,* because the special issue mostly focussed on "Gaelic" not just as a language, but as a wider ground of embeddedness in cultural communities that are geographically defined. It drew upon a sociolinguistic survey, *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (2020), and a further sense of the issue's breath can be drawn from two of its major section headings: "A Plural *Gàidhealtachd*," and the 19th century land reformers' slogan: "*An Tìr, an Cànan 's na Daoine'* / 'The Land, the Language and the People'." An airing was given both to voices well-known and to the less well known, both to those academically established and to those whose contribution is more grounded in community experience. It left me thinking of an essay "Bounded Space" by the Apache philosopher, Viola Cordova, and her observation that "the concept of existing within very definite boundaries has been given very little attention by researchers". I thought how good it is that in a concept such as *Gàidhealtachd*, and with contributions on such themes as *dùthchas* as our traditional ecological knowledge, we actually have such an integration of both natural and human ecology.

However, because such discourses touch on identity and belonging, the special issue was bound to raise contentious questions. Theorising such debates are the stuff of academia. And that, as what the theologian and sociologist of religion Richard Roberts, in summing up Alasdair MacIntyre on the characteristics of the specifically *Scottish* university, has eloquently summed up as being, "a community of contested discourses". True to such contestation, a group of six scholars, distinguished for their contributions to linguistics and social policy, wrote a double riposte to some of the special issue's positions. With Dr Timothy Currie Armstrong and Professor Wilson McLeod as the lead authors, this was published earlier this month in the current issue

of *Scottish Affairs* (31:1). Alongside it, were placed replies from Oliver, MacKinnon and five of their colleagues. In the meantime, flights of letters, columns and an editorial had appeared in the *West Highland Free Press*, including a letter from Professor McLeod and four colleagues, three of them also professors, in a specially featured correspondence page dedicated to "the Gaelic Development Debate".

In reality, they said, the Oliver-MacKinnon edition of *Scottish Affairs* had been "strategically designed to exclude almost all the established academic experts on Gaelic policy and sociolinguistics, as well as the numerous younger scholars who have recently earned doctorates in the field" (WHFP 14-2-22). To this, MacKinnon replied on the same page: "Our chosen focus was cultural and social regeneration in the *Gàidhealtachd*. That is a much broader topic than Gaelic policy and sociolinguistics…." The editorial, the same week, added salt by criticising the growing force of "voices and opinions of central belt-based academics" in influencing Gaelic policy. It asked whether they might be starting "to give up on the indigenous *Gàidhealtachd* community" (in the sense of what is found on the ground) and added, with a further smart: "In an era of self-identification, if anyone regards themselves *Gàidheal*, who can dispute it?"

To this, Wilson McLeod and his colleagues replied the following week, saying that the newspaper had "completely misrepresented our views", and that "where scholars are based is completely irrelevant – what should matter is what we say, rather than where we live or indeed where we come from" (WHFP 21-1-22). And so, the debate rolled on into the following month. It was a feisty flyting to say the least: an airing suitably consistent with the letters' page encouragement to "get it off your chest".

Invoking the Democratic Intellect

One can sense the edgy lines being drawn, or rather, being drawn out into the open. In Scotland's tradition of the democratic intellect, it is recognised that scholarly acumen creates elites. Knowledge can be power. But that such elites, to retain their legitimacy, must both test their knowledge in, and render it as service to, the *demos* (as in democracy), which is to say, the community. And yet, and yet … for scholars whose call is to the archives, or influence down corridors of power, or who must spend their evenings tussling to get funding for the cause, to balance all of that with sustaining banter on the ground while hauling in the nets or bringing in the peats is easier said than done these days for many. So often in competitive academia it's hard to be "a high achiever" in focussed "task" – measured and monitored in research assessments – and yet sustain people-immersed but time-consuming "process".

When the Bella Caledonia editor asked me to chip in my tuppence worth, I initially declined. I have close friends on both sides of this debate, I respect variously these people's scholarship, dedication and community experience. Inasmuch as there are disagreements, the flurry of writings in both the academic and the local press seemed to me to have aired a goodly spectrum of opinion. Also, while I am qualified in and inclined towards the place-based side of the argument (having been raised in the Isle of Lewis with a strong Gaelic/*Gàidhealtachd* ancestry), like many of mid-20th century provenance and from an incomer family, I do not speak the language. I am therefore poorly qualified to give the linguistic side of the debate a fair airing. What changed my inclination not to comment, was a self-described "monster thread" about the matter on Twitter by the linguist, Mark McConville. And that, promptly followed by a much-respected overseas scholar of what it means to be indigenous making contact, and demanding to know: "What the blazes is going on …?"

That drew me in, for in my opinion, McConville spotlighted a detailed range of key issues, but with a relentlessness hammering spread over several days that, at one point, led him to remark that he had not envisaged his thread "turning into the Twitter equivalent of a 'punishment beating'. A one-man pile-on!"

Notice, my reader of this social media age, the effect that might have on your judgement. If you don't already know which side is getting the "beating", your sympathies may well be poised to polarise, irrespective of the merits, with the perceived underdog. Remember, that this has played itself out during Covid, without the benefit of rubbing shoulders in a face-to-face debate and perhaps chance

afterwards to "tak a right gude-willie waught." Indeed, I was struck that in a letter on the different reasons why people learn Gaelic from Mairi NicAonghais, the Chair of Bòrd na Gàidhlig (WHFP 14-1-22), Covid was twice mentioned. She said that the pandemic has hugely boosted online learning, but I also wondered if it might have sharpened edges in some conduct of the debate. Notice, too, how the need for simplification draws me into talk of "sides" and I become unintentionally complicit in compounding that narratorial drift. And notice, finally, that with this being a "difficult conversation", and no-one (at the time of writing, as far as I'm aware) having offered a counterpoint to McConville's thread, how the narrow emotional bandwith of social media like Twitter can further swing the balance and turn up the heat of things.

That is not a criticism of McConville, or of other parties in the debate. Rather, it is something more important. It is a call to awareness of how easily and unconsciously divisions can arise. I happen to agree with most of what McConville had to say. That is my bias, or my judgment as I'd prefer to think of it. What played out in *Scottish Affairs* and through the WHFP had sufficient column-inches of space to provide balance. Some contributions might be seen as standing in the Scots tradition of "flyting" – a vigorous community of contested discourses – but with the bottom-line safeguard of editorial oversight. It could be argued that it expressed its own Caledonian antisyzygy, where opposites held together in tension to generate a "potential difference", and that, of intellectual and artistic voltage. But, but, but – to continue with the electronics metaphor – social media so easily "rectifies" the athletic to-and-fro of AC (alternating current) into a stratified one-way stream of DC (direct current) discourse. And as any electrician will tell you, because DC is both unidirectional and unrelentingly constant, it more easily "arcs". Which is to say, it sparks. And causes fires. And so to my friend's, "What the blazes is going on…?"

A Battle for the Soul

I stress again, this is not a criticism of McConville, or of individual parties to the debate. People can read their respective points and tone and make their own minds up. The *Scottish Affairs* paywalls on the above-linked two issues are temporarily suspended for these articles. My repeat emphasis of "not a criticism" might sound disingenuous. I have, indeed, had to think it through! But I assert it for a reason, as a springboard to a greater point of understanding the ways in which differing voices can speak for differing aspects of contested community.

My overseas scholar friend went on to make a penetrating observation. She linked the Gaelic Development Debate to wider archetypal dynamics in the world. By "archetypal" in this context, I mean – bear with me – the collective and largely unconscious depth psychological processes and living mythic patternings that reveal their presence and ordering in "the signs of the times". This invites an opening to what MacDiarmid in his poem, "Good-bye Twilight", described as a clear "spiritual vision or insight into the true inwardness of the thing." And that, to serve what? To raise us: "Out of your melancholy moping, your impotence, Gaels"!

Here, we move beyond individualism and into the collective, the cultural carrying stream. But individuals give articulation. Specifically, my scholarly interlocutor said of what is happening around Gaelic and the *Gàidhealtachd* in general, and parallels in other cultures with indigenous antecedents: "I believe it is a massive personal and collective spiritual crisis, the roots of which are the most profound alienations from our true nature. I believe we are witnessing a ferocious battle for the soul of humanity right now."

I know that many might reject such language. But from my spiritual, cultural and intellectual grounding, it hits the mark. It affirms "all this" as bigger than the individuals through which it finds expression. The prophets always were a scratchy lot! I see such voices as the servants of a greater apotheosis. Let's treat them gently and cut some slack, for goodness's sake. Let's treat them gently! I am slowly reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* just now. Slowly, because I am slow, but also because I keep on stopping to reflect, not least, on what is unfolding this week with Russia, NATO and Ukraine.

Tolstoy is recognised as a historian with his novel-writing skills. He not only read all the major Russian and French histories, but in his research, he conducted interviews,

visited battle sites, and made original observations. He gives the opinion that the historians of the time, "in their simple-minded certitude", pin the causes of the Napoleonic invasion on such tangibles as the violence done to the Duke of Oldenburg, or Russia's non-observance of the Continental System of trade blockade with England, or the mistakes of out-of-touch diplomats and generals. But really, he says, the cruelty and destruction of the assault on Russia that "defied human reason and all human nature" resulted from "billions" of factors that conspired together; "and these events had no single cause, being bound to happen simply because they were bound to happen."

As if reading from the Lost Book of Hebridean Calvinism (reference to be supplied), he considers these as bearing "a significance which has more to do with predetermination than freedom."

To my eye, one needs an aperture that is similarly wide to bring us back to the fundamental double question. Is "Gaelic" primarily linguistic, its future being mainly as a dispersed network of speakers? Or is it primarily of place, community-based in ways that build on ethnic and ancestral antecedents, but with these modified as befits the shifting demographics of today? It is, of course, a false dichotomy. But such is easily missed if we over-identify a debate with the individuals who have the courage to articulate it, and narrow the aperture down to "MacKinnon saying this…" or "McLeod saying that…" or "McConville tweeting …" Mind you, if you ever need a good case for the defence!

Understanding Cultural Invasion

To take this deeper, let me stick with Napoleon. He's as good a place as any of those "billions" of events – Macmillan's "events, my dear boy, events" – that bring Gaelic and the *Gàidhealtachd* to where we find them now. Let's remind ourselves of what it is that has become of us; of the psychohistory (the psychological history), and not just a history of "maps and chaps". I can say, "us", without overreach, because my own four times great Maclennan grandparents' eviction from Strathconan is harrowingly documented, to nothing less than its *spiritual* depth, in Tom Johnson's *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (p. 203). As the Balfour London brewing magnates made way for a hundred square-mile deer forest, the people "crouched together," Johnson wrote, "praying rather for a merciful death than that they should be driven farther from the strath of their birth." And in his great poem *Spiorad a' Charthannais* (The Spirit of Kindliness), the Lewis poet Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn (John Smith) wrote about island soldiers coming back from the Napoleonic wars, only to find their homes burned to the ground in similar Highland Clearances. Their persecutors, not Napoleon, but domestic oppressors, who:

…reckoned as but brittle threads

the tight and loving cords

that bound these freemen's noble hearts

to the high land of the hills.

The grief they suffered brought them death

although they suffered long,

tormented by the cold world

which had no warmth for them.

With dispossession from the land came the repression of the language. Even into my childhood, children were encouraged not to speak the vernacular at school, and older folks had harrowing first hand accounts of punishment. Gaelic was "a backward language". English was the way ahead if we were to "get on and get out". The Clearances were built on overt colonisation. Contemporary historians are increasingly frank in saying so. But what matters, is less what happened, as where it leaves us now. Why it leaves "the Gael" so easily set up as dogged by "infighting". The "lateral violence" of like-on-like spilling out sideways, when the "vertical violence" of power

from above cannot be dealt with. We are living, still, in the elastic rebound of those "tight and loving cords", stretched to divide a people against themselves. And even, to divide us within ourselves. It is helpful to remember this in cutting slack, in going gently, in the Gaelic Development and similar debates.

This history from early modernity merges into later modernity and postmodernity. It constitutes what Paulo Freire (pp. 121-3) wrote about as "cultural invasion"; a process that is "on the one hand an *instrument* of domination, and on the other, the *result* of domination." One whereby "those who are invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather their own." And as Alice Walker (pp. 59-60) speaking from African and Native American perceptions said of the *Wasichu*, the white man: "Regardless. / He has filled / our every face / with his window. / Our every window / with / his face."

Time, Language and Embeddedness

My bias is to the spiritual, to the ground of being, to the "interiority" of outer realities. That so often is the missing link in deeper understanding both of Gaelic, and its embedding in the *Gàidhealtachd.* To me, colonialism has three eyes. It is, of course *Imperial*, being control of territory, to extract resources, labour and military conscripts. It is also as historians like Michael Hechter have discussed, *Internal*, in the sense of regional control and economic differences within the boundaries of a state. But at the deepest level, least recognised except in liberation theologies and in the growing field of cultural traumatic psychology, it is *Inner*. Of the soul or psyche. But let me go there by a more orthodox route.

In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens describes what he calls "the disembedding of social systems" as the hallmark of late modernity. In the early pages of a tightly argued opening chapter, he discusses how social relations and their markers get lifted out of their local contexts of interaction, and restructured "across indefinite spans of time-space." In the past, in traditional societies, time was bound to space. One watched the stars and sun, the moon and tides, the cosmic rhythm of the seasons and their rhythms within life. The interposition of mechanical time, clock time, brought about "an emptying of time" that led, in turn, to "an emptying of space" and a loosening of the attachment between the one and the other. How so? When you can fly, instead of having to take a boat, Stornoway is just an hour from Glasgow. But that alters rhythms of relationship. The contraction of time changes how we interact with space.

That might seem obvious when set out like that. But consider the implications. In 1968, a three-year experiment was begun with Daylight Saving Time. To give an extra evening hour the clocks were not put back in winter. It was strange for us to go to school in total darkness. Being far to both the north and west, dawn didn't fully break 'till getting on for ten. There was a tale that circulated, perhaps apocryphal, about an old crofter. For us in North Lochs he was said to bide in South Lochs. Perhaps in South Lochs he was told as one of us. It was said that he refused to turn up at church according to this cock-eyed arrangement. He wasn't having Harold Wilson's time! That was just for farmers in the south. He was sticking, thank you very much, to "God's own time".

Giddens makes the same point, but formally. The effect of space and time going AWOL is to "cut through the connections between social activity and its 'embedding' in the particularities of contexts of presence." This causes a "breaking free from the restraints of local habits and practices." When that happens, money substitutes for real-life relationships, decaying them to "distanciated transactions". Money, he says, with a passing nod to Marx, becomes "a medium of exchange which negates the content of goods or services by substituting for them an impersonal standard." You can see the writing on the crofter's wall. It's only a matter of time before his church, that once comprised the heart of the community, but has since become discombobulated in so many ways, becomes a holiday house for those who fly up twice a year and hang their washing out on Sundays.

I wonder if the same might go for languages and their relationship to places? To Gaelic and the *Gàidhealtachd*? If the language drifts too far from its embeddedness, can it too take on the qualities of a commodity? In an era where so many folks are

disembedded, can this potentise it, but as a fetish of identity? For language, to borrow a newly fashionable word from accountancy, can be said to be "fungible". One of its virtues is transferability. That can very much be its gift. That is why new learners can bring joy and restoration to the *Gàidhealtachd.* But if the language finds itself adrift from such a context, something hollow opens out. If Gidden's take on disembeddedness applies to this debate, we must be careful of evacuation of the soul. I am minded that in *Tok Pisin*, the Melanesian Pidgin of Papua New Guinea where I lived for four years, the term for language is *tok ples*. Literally, "the talk of a place". Language that is too closely bound to place will die the death of introspection. But language that becomes too far removed from place will wither from a lack of wells to drink from. And for whatever complex reasons, there is unease around this matter in vernacular communities. In her featured letter on behalf of the *Guth Nan Siarach Group* in Lewis, Jane NicLeòid wrote: "Learner and native speakers living in the islands and our disparate needs should be the first consideration of both our government, their agencies and the board, as happens with communities elsewhere. We are the ones living here … in the most challenging of settings. The vernacular Gaels in this region are the Gaelic community in greatest peril" (WHFP 28-2-22).

It is good to keep the *Gàidhealtachd* wellsprings tended on the ground. That's why, in days gone by, they blessed the wells that slaked the thirst of residents and passing sojourners.

God, *Gàidhealtachd* and Forgiveness

Which brings me to the point of faith, and to the arguable relationship in the *Gàidhealtachd* between language and religion. I have discussed elsewhere how evangelicalism was introduced as an adjunct to colonisation or "pacification", and how it rapidly became indigenised. Hardline Calvinist religion was not native to such folk spirituality as can be seen described in such as Alexander Carmichael's collection, the *Carmina Gadelica*, or the worldview of the Rev Kenneth Macleod of Skye and Eigg. Like Welsh chapel culture, the Highland church in its various schismatic personae evolved from an intrusion to an anchor of identity. Ronald Black makes an important remark in an endnote to his anthology of 20th century Gaelic poetry. He says: "throughout the twentieth-century respect for the Sabbath, rather than for the language, remained the principal marker of Gaelic identity" (*An Tuil,* p. 719). That was certainly very true of my childhood in North Lochs, and with older people especially, it often remains true. It was not whether you spoke Gaelic that marked you as belonging in the community. It was your relationship to faith and your embeddedness in what you did "for the community".

Late modernity hit the Hebrides in the 1970s. Many folks will say that, it may just be a cliché. But in Lewis, I've heard it said that such was when the change swept in "like switching out a light", though one would hope, perhaps just transient dimming as the power flickers in a storm. Moreover, the internet and travel opened up new worlds, both theological and atheistic. As the *Gàidhealtachd* secularised, as formal religion loosened its tight social grip, so language began to rival and maybe overtake religion as a key marker of identity.

My good friend the scholar Michael Newton has warned me to be careful of this argument. If I might attempt to paraphrase him, religion of the 18th and 19th centuries, thrust in by missionary efforts as a means of social reform and control, had only temporarily usurped the place of language as a defining feature of identity and culture. All that's happening now, is that language is resuming its claim. But that assumes that before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, vernacular Gaels saw their *tok ples* as their defining characteristic. To enter that debate would go above my pay grade. Suffice to make this point. I suspect that one reason why the Gaelic Development Debate has become so potentised, is that it's carrying a weight that religion previously helped to bear. To have the Gaelic more than to be Free Church, or whatever, has become a more public way of saying to the world: "I belong and have a right to be here."

The upside, is that it gives the language an augmented meaning. The downside, is that it begs the question as to whether you can be a Gael without the language, and whether merely learning the language renders you a Gael. When I was a boy in the

1960s, people could tell the Gaelic of one part of the island for another. Today, when our relationships to space and time have changed so much that South Lochs is no longer far away from North Lochs – and learners need (to borrow from Adrienne Rich) "the dream of a common language" – standardisation is necessary. But often from the old folks in the villages I'll hear the same complaint. They don't like the "BBC Gaelic" or "SMO Gaelic", or whatever synthetic name they lay upon it. To them, this messes with their sense of ownership and identity. On the one hand, they fear the guests taking over the guesthouse. On the other hand, it doesn't take the Brahan Seer to recognise that without the guests, the guesthouse will fall down, and so too much else in the village.

Which brings me back to Tolstoy. Both sides of this debate – Gaelic as a disembedded network, Gaelic as embedded in *Gàidhealtachd* – have been caught up in events that were "bound to happen simply because they were bound to happen." They are where we stand in time and history. Any deep engagement with our topic requires understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. As the great Spanish-Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar put it: "Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma." Only forgiveness breaks the knock-on manner by which events will otherwise so blindly bind us. Once again. *Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.* Or as the old folks, might say daily, not from Sanskrit but the King James Version: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Towards the Human

Where does all this leave us? First, remember my limitations. I am glad that this is to be published with comments open and I welcome other points of view and of correction. I think we have to ask where lies the openings of the way for both the *Gàidhealtachd* and the Gaelic language.

The *West Highland Free Press*, which claims to be the UK's first employee-owned newspaper, has as its strapline the aforementioned slogan, *An Tìr, An Cànan, 'S na Daoine*. The land, the language, and the people. An example of where I see the greatest hope is in land reform. It restores a foothold in the land that allows a deepening of what the Lewis writer, Iain Crichton Smith, in his essays, *Towards the Human* (1986), called "Real People in a Real Place". Go into parts of the *Gàidhealtachd* that are now held in land trusts, go to community hubs like the beautiful new *Grinneabhat* centre in the "West Side" of Lewis, and you'll run into young folks delighting in their language, loving their crofting way of life, and culturally qualified to walk into the future. And this, the gift both of the people on the land and the scholars in the academy, with whom not a few of them have done their degrees. Gaelic needs such soil to grow in and to fly around and share from.

Here is not the place and space to unpack how and why land reform does that. I have attempted that elsewhere, and Community Land Scotland, not least, has built up an expanding online library of research and case studies. But notice, there is a downside to some of what I've just said. What about those who may feel excluded by Smith's description? What's to separate that recovery of belonging from, as one critical friend put it to me recently, a Scottish form of Trumpism?

What about New Scots? What about urban dwellers far from *Gàidhealtachd* heartlands, but also with a calling to the land, the language, and the people? I think we must remember what it is that we hold sacred. In our tradition, and Alexander Carmichael is so helpful here, there are two sacred duties. Hospitality for the short term. And fostership for permanence. I live in Govan, Glasgow. Vérène and I came here eighteen years ago not by happenstance, not because I wouldn't have been tempted to go back to Leurbost, but because we were invited by a local protest group that became the GalGael Trust. The BBC documentary *The Birdman of Pollock* tells the story of this urban community, open to all, and draws out its *Gàidhealtachd* connections.

The said "birdman" was the late Colin Macleod, whose mother is from Donegal and father from South Lochs. Colin saw the need for disembedded urban folks, especially those with hard-pressed lives, to also find their footing in communities of belonging. In reading Scottish history, he hit upon a term from the ninth century, that described

the strange or foreign Gaels, those of mixed blood from when the Norse came down – the "Gal" – who melded over time with "Gael", the heartland people.

And so, today, we're all "GalGael". There's a bit of the stranger, and a bit of the native in us all. All, wherever we might originate from, can be embedded once again, becoming in new ways indigenous to place. "No life without roots," it's said, and if you've lost your roots, that's where the hospitality and fostership kick in. The Skye poet Maoilios Caimbeul, was kind enough to translate into Gaelic a few words that I wrote about this matter. I'll close his rendition first. Thank you if you've read this far. And if you'd be so kind, "forgive us our debts."

Alba

Buinidh neach an seo

fhad 's a tha iad deònach

tasgadh is a bhith air an tasgadh

leis an àite

agus a mhuinntir

*

Scotland

A person belongs

inasmuch as they are willing

to cherish and be cherished

by a place

and its peoples

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Mary MacCallum Sullivan 24th February 2022 at 8:49 am

Excellent, complex, scholarly, and well-argued, Alastair.
As a Scot who has, by degrees, returned to my ancestral heartlands after many decades away, I yearn for the Gaelic language to give me better access to my own 'search for meaning', but am beset to delay and distraction by other (moral) demands for (John) Macmurrayite action and reflection. I was and continue to be delighted with the passion in the 'flying'/'contested discourse'. It gives me hope, because I profoundly believe that the revival of the Gaelic – and the other indigenous Scottish languages – is a necessary development in our 'cultural psychotherapy' which I trust will assist in the work to regain our moral and political independence as inhabitants of the place of Scotland.

Reply

Finlay Macleoid 24th February 2022 at 11:00 am

So how is it going to happen?

Reply

Alastair McIntosh 26th February 2022 at 1:40 pm

Thank you so much, Mary. I often think of Lesley Riddoch (with whom I worked closely on land reform in Eigg back in the 1990s) and her once saying that to become independent as a peoples, we have to become independent within ourselves. And that, not in the individualistic sense, but in the sense of entering into our our power and calling, if I might put it like that. That's a large part of why I wrote this article, and I'm very pleased to sense you picking up on the same drift.

Reply

Finlay Macleoid 24th February 2022 at 10:19 am

I am trying to work out what this article is about while at the same time putting proposals together on how we can increase the number of fluent Gaelic speakers to 150,000 over a 15 year period. We have at this stage developed the third phase of the project and almost finished the first phase and it is the second phase that needs to be started and completed over the next few months. This debate seems to be so outside the box at present with little practical application involved. Such as how you can take 2, 3 and 4 year old children to speaking Gaelic in 16 weeks or the methodology on how you can take Gaelic learners to speaking Gaelic fluently in 12 weeks. Plus where you start to develop and strengthen Gaelic communities in different parts of Scotland over a 15 year period and what facilities that are required. Theories are alright but it is hard practical realities that work that are required. The question must be asked how deeply involved in practical Gaelic development have all those who like to comment on Gaelic over the past 30 years be it in Canada, Scotland Wales or Ireland.

Reply

Finlay Macleoid 24th February 2022 at 10:21 am

I would like to know where are all their practical solutions and how do they plan to execute them?

Reply

Stuart a Jackson 24th February 2022 at 12:13 pm

your right there Finlay, I have put a proposal to The Alba party about a national approach as well as one centred on the Gàidhealtachd and Canada, to try and get a pool of teachers established out with local authority control and on a national scale to work in tandem with existing bodies, the methodology is key as is who has access or is brought into the fold so to speak, i comes up at conference in May. even if Alba isn't politically big, doesn't mean the ideas haven't got legs so to speak. you need structures and plans of actions logistics, money is key, not naval gazing.

Reply

Ottomanboi 24th February 2022 at 3:43 pm

One practical step would be the recognition of Gaelic as an official language, that would increase its visibility beyond the Gaelic speaking «reservations». In Wales, for example, cymraeg has high visibility even in areas that have been anglicized for generations.
A modern English/Gaelic dictionary, an academy as a focus for language planning and development, the encouragement of translation into Gaelic of major world literary works, from original language not English versions, would stretch (and «challenge») grammar and lexis beyond the comfortable confines of the ususual cultural milieu.
There will be protests of waste of money that would not be used with reference to the environment. The human «environment» needs care too and should not be crushed under the mega bulldozers of americanization.
Of course you also need a government with people in it who care about culture.

Reply

Finlay Macleoid 24th February 2022 at 8:37 pm

You also need people who know what to do and have actually been involved and seen success. Sadly there are very few in this category in Scotland. Lots of talkers but very few doers.

Reply

John McLeod 26th February 2022 at 6:18 am

This article is about the Gaelic, and what it means to different people. At the same time, it includes a little gift from Alastair, in paragraph 4 – a link to, and mention of, the writings of the indigenous North American philosopher Viola Cardova. I had never heard of her before, and spent a lot of last night tracking down bits of her writing on the internet, and starting to find out what it was all about. Even on the basis of that limited engagement with her ideas, there were two very helpful perspectives that stood out. One, as cited by Alastair, is the idea of the bounded space – living one's life (and similar for previous and future generations) within a particular territory or piece of land. Cardova explains what this means in terms of a deep sense of belonging, of the type that in our own civilization is hard to even begin to understand. And also what it means in terms of relationships with the other (human and otherwise). A futher profound and emotionally moving aspect of her writing is that it is positioned as someone from another world explaining to us whities – in a compassionate and caring, but still mindful of the crimes we have committed on their people – about what it is we have lost.

Reply

Alastair McIntosh 26th February 2022 at 1:51 pm

Thank you John, and I'm thrilled to hear of folks following up on some of the thinking in this piece – I've had several private messages to similar effect. Viola Cordova was the first Native American woman to receive a PhD in philosopy. I first encountered her by chance through an article she wrote in 1997 called 'Ecoindian: A Response to J. Baird Callicott' it was in Ayaangwaamizin: International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy, 1:1, 31– 44. Her best know work is the book, "How It Is: the Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova (2007).

I quoted the following passage from her on p. 33 of "Soil and Soul", and drew attention to how close what she described had been to those of us who had a Hebridean childhood in the mid-20th century. Here's the quote, and it's from the Ayaangwaamizin article:

"Many years ago I watched my daughter and her 'Anglo' friend take their infant sons out for their first springtime. My daughter set her eight- or nine-month-old son on to a barely greening lawn. She introduced him to the grass, encouraging him to touch it, even taste it. She pointed out the temperature, the breeze, the sky and clouds. The other mother came differently prepared for her son's encounter with the world. She brought a blanket, which she spread out for her son. She brought toys as distractions and she did not join her son so much as hovered over him in a protective manner: not allowing him to crawl away from the blanket; not allowing him to grasp at the grass ('dirty'). My daughter introduced her son to the world he lived in; the other mother introduced her son to a potentially dangerous 'environment'. The Anglo child's world consisted of his toys, his blanket, his mother, his artificial setting; the world 'out there' was alien. He ended his excursion in his mother's arms. My grandson ended his when his mother chased after him as he explored his new surroundings. 'This is the way it is done,' I thought. 'This is why we are different.' We discourage competitiveness and encourage cooperativeness; we frown on self-ish behaviour and encourage perceptiveness of the other; we correct by offering alternatives rather than through threat of punishment or admonitions; we encourage laughter and camaraderie – there is no one 'out there' waiting to 'get us.' We transmit these values through loaning our attitudes to our children."

Reply

John McLeod 26th February 2022 at 7:05 pm

Wonderful piece of Cordova's writing. Thanks.

Reply