Scottish Gaelic is a Celtic language and is closely related to Irish and Manx Gaelic. It evolved from the old Irish brought to Scotland by settlers from the North of Ireland in the first half of the first millennia. It can claim to be Scotland’s oldest living language. Like the other Celtic languages of the western periphery of Europe, though, it is a minoritised language. In terms of both demographics and articulated state language policy, Scottish Gaelic is generally in an inferior position to Welsh and Irish. Gaelic is one of the weaker of Celtic languages, themselves the weakest group of languages in the Indo-European family, and it must be considered one of Europe’s more threatened minority languages.

In this presentation, I shall begin by describing the current sociolinguistic position of Gaelic in Scotland. An understanding of the sociolinguistic position is absolutely essential in assessing Gaelic language policy and, in particular, the effectiveness of past and present language policy initiatives. After considering the sociolinguistic background, I shall then briefly review the development of Gaelic language policy in Scotland before turning to a number of factors which presently impinge on policy in Scotland, including devolution and international legal commitments. I shall then look more closely at current initiatives. I shall argue that the case of Gaelic presents a number of interesting insights.
into both the possibilities and limitations of different policy tools, and I hope that these observations are of relevance beyond the Gaelic case. Finally, time permitting, I shall say a few words about Gaelic in Canada; it, too, presents its own language policy perplexities.

The Sociolinguistic Situation

The lack of detailed, reliable, and current information on the sociolinguistic position of Gaelic poses a very significant barrier to both appropriate design and effective implementation of language policy. Most of the information we have is demographic, the main source being the decennial British Census which, since 1881, has contained information on Gaelic. Although this information is valuable, it is subject to the limitations which generally apply to census material, in particular the difficulties of self-reporting. Furthermore, census information does not tell us much about actual patterns of language use or attitudes towards a language, and it is precisely this sort of information which is essential for a fuller sociolinguistic picture and for more effective policy design and implementation.

Successive censuses have shown a generally steady and relatively sharp decline in the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland. The 1891 census, for example, revealed that there were 254,415 Gaelic speakers in Scotland, representing 6.75% of the total population. By 1981, the number had fallen to 79,307, representing 1.64% of the Scottish population, and numbers and percentages of Gaelic-speakers have continued to fall since then: in 1991, there were 65,978 Gaelic speakers, representing 1.37% of the population, and by 2001, the number was 58,562, or 1.21% of the population. The 2001 census did, however, indicate that the rate of decline is slowing: the annual loss between 1981 and 1991 was 1,333 speakers on average, whereas between 1991 and 2001 it had fallen to 733 on average. For the first time, it also contained information on numbers of people who could understand, but not speak, read or write the language. There were 26,722 people in this category. Undoubtedly, some of these are learners, but it is likely that most are “semi-speakers”—people who have grown up in Gaelic-speaking households or communities, but who have insufficient ability, or perhaps confidence, to speak the language. The existence of this group has implications for policy, particularly acquisition planning.

These overall figures tell only part of the story. There are five other demographic facts indicated by the census data which have crucial implications for policy. The first is the age profile of speakers of the language. The 2001 census showed that about a quarter of all Gaelic-speakers were over 65, and slightly over half (53%) were aged 45 or over;

3. Learners who have learned enough Gaelic to be able to comprehend also tend to be literate.
Gaelic-speakers tend to be over-represented in those age-groups.\textsuperscript{4} By contrast, Gaelic speakers aged 3 to 15 made represented only about 13\% of all Gaelic-speakers, and they tend to be under-represented in those age-groups.\textsuperscript{5} The 2001 results for the 3 to 15 age-group were better than those for 1991,\textsuperscript{6} suggesting that aspects of existing policy, in particular, acquisition policy, discussed further below, may be having some effect. However, the improvements were not sufficient to turn the tide or begin reversing the downward demographic trend. It is also not clear that such a rude numerical calculus captures the linguistic reality, as the language skills of the generations being lost and those being educated differ in very important respects, and these considerations must also be borne in mind.

The second important demographic fact is that the “heartlands” of the language—areas in which it is spoken by a majority of the population—are shrinking rapidly, and that there is serious demographic weakness in the remaining heartland areas. At the 1891 census, Gaelic was spoken by a majority of the population in several counties in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. By 1981, Gaelic was spoken by a majority only in the Western Isles, a new local authority area formed by local government reorganisation in the 1970s. Even here, both numbers and percentages of Gaelic speakers have been falling steadily: in 1981, there were 23,446 Gaelic speakers represented 76.3\% of the population,\textsuperscript{7} but by 2001, numbers of Gaelic speakers had fallen by almost 8,000, to 15,811, representing only 59.66\% of the population. The percentage decline would have been sharper, except that the population of the Western Isles itself is declining quite sharply.\textsuperscript{8} Young people, in particular, tend to leave once they have finished secondary school. This exodus is largely due to a weak and vulnerable local economy located in an isolated, rural area, and this is itself a significant economic and social policy issue. It is also a problem that Gaelic shares with many other minoritised languages. The relationship between economic and social policy, on the one hand, and language policy on the other, is often overlooked, at least by policy-makers, and I shall return to this below.

The third important demographic fact is that ever greater percentages of Gaelic-speakers live outside of the heartlands, but in areas in which such speakers enjoy very little demographic concentration. In 2001, almost 45\% of Gaelic-speakers lived outside the areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in which Gaelic was traditionally the

\textsuperscript{4} In 2001, Gaelic speakers make up 1.78\% of those aged 65 and over in Scotland, and 1.36\% of those aged 45 to 64; Gaelic-speakers as a whole made up 1.21\% of the population.
\textsuperscript{5} Gaelic-speakers make up only 0.92\% of all Scots in their age group, whereas they make up 1.21\% of the Scottish population as a whole.
\textsuperscript{6} In the 1991 census, Gaelic-speakers in this age group represented only 0.86\% of the age group as a whole. Both the number of Gaelic-speakers aged from 3 to 15 and their percentage of all Gaelic speakers had increased somewhat from 1991: 7,435 speakers, representing 12.68\% of all Gaelic speakers (compared to 7,092 speakers, representing 10.75\% of all Gaelic speakers in 1991).
\textsuperscript{7} See General Register Office for Scotland, \textit{supra}, note 14.
\textsuperscript{8} Between 1991 and 2001, there was a 10.5\% loss in population, but a 19.6\% decrease in the numbers of Gaelic speakers.
indigenous language. A sizeable majority of Gaelic speakers—well in excess of 60%, now live in districts in which Gaelic-speakers are a fairly small minority—less than 25% of the local population. While significant numbers of Gaelic speakers live in major urban centres such as Glasgow and Edinburgh—about 6,000, or 10% of the Gaelic-speaking population, live in Glasgow, and about 3,000 in Edinburgh, the Scottish capital—they make up a tiny percentage of the local population—less than 1% in both cities. Small numbers, both in absolute and percentage terms, mean that these communities are almost invisible at a local level. While there have in the past been significant concentrations of Gaelic-speakers in certain districts in urban areas, particularly in parts of Glasgow, this is largely no longer the case. There are no “Gaelic ghettos” where the language is heard regularly on the streets, in shops, and so forth. While no detailed studies have yet been done on language transmission in the home in urban areas, it is almost certainly the case that such transmission is very weak. This is not surprising. Joshua Fishman stresses the importance of having a concentrated demographic base as a prerequisite to language maintenance strategies.\footnote{9} Gaelic lacks that demographic concentration, particularly in urban areas and outside the heartlands.

The fourth important demographic fact is that intergenerational transmission of the language in the home is weak everywhere—both within the “heartlands” and outside them. For example, the 1991 census showed that in households with two Gaelic-speaking parents, only 72.6% of children spoke the language. In households where a Gaelic-speaker was a single parent, only 37.6% of children spoke the language. Crucially, in households where only one of the two parents spoke the language—by far the most common arrangement for Gaelic\footnote{10}—only 14.3% of children spoke Gaelic.\footnote{11} The problem of the weakness of intergenerational transmission of the language is a particularly stark challenge in the Gaelic “heartlands”. For example, census results have showed a sharp decline in both numbers and percentages of children in the 3 to 15 age group in the Western Isles who speak Gaelic: in 1981, 67.8% of children in this age group were Gaelic speakers, while by 2001, the number of Gaelic-speakers in this age group had fallen to 1,966 representing 46.3% of all children in this age group.\footnote{12} Apparently, the sharp decline in numbers and percentages of young Gaelic speakers in the Western Isles is continuing; recent evidence suggests that in the late 1990s only about a quarter of the children entering primary schools in the Western Isles had acquired Gaelic in their homes;\footnote{13} this accords with the 2001 census.\footnote{14}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{9}{Joshua A. Fishman, \textit{Reversing Language Shift}, (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1991).}
\item \footnote{10}{55\% of households with Gaelic-speakers fit into this category in 1991.}
\item \footnote{11}{See Kenneth MacKinnon, “The Dynamics of Scottish Gaelic”, a paper presented at the conference on Language Policy and Planning in the European Union, Liverpool, 28-29 April, 1995, at figure 8. Prof. MacKinnon has indicated that it may not be possible to make the same sort of analysis based on the 2001 census, because it is not clear whether the necessary information will appear in an accessible format.}
\item \footnote{12}{MacKinnon, \textit{supra}, note 16.}
\item \footnote{13}{Wilson McLeod, “Gaelic in the New Scotland: Politics, Rhetoric and Public Discourse”, \textit{Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe}, Summer 2001, p. 3.}
\item \footnote{14}{The 2001 census indicated that only 26.8\% of children in the Western Isles aged 3 to 4 were Gaelic speakers.}
\end{itemize}
Fifth, and finally, there are relatively low rates of literacy amongst Gaelic speakers. The 1991 census showed that only 42,159 people, or 63.9% of all Gaelic speakers aged 3 and over, could read Gaelic, and that only 30,760 people, or 46.6% of all Gaelic speakers 3 and over, could write it. Since 1991, there has been a significant expansion in Gaelic-medium education, and so one would expect that levels of literacy, at least amongst the youngest age groups of Gaelic speakers, will have risen. In spite of this, fewer Gaelic-speakers—only 39,184—could read the language, although they made up a larger percentage, 66.8%, of all Gaelic speakers.\textsuperscript{15} or 77.4% of all Gaelic speakers aged 3 or over, could read the language. The numbers of Gaelic speakers who could also write Gaelic had, however, increased slightly over 1991: 31,235 people, or 53.3% of all Gaelic-speakers aged 3 and over, could write the language.\textsuperscript{16}

Taken together, this is not a pretty picture. It is, as noted, still an incomplete picture. We need much more information about what is happening to the language and its speakers, and why. But even this incomplete picture offers some important guidance for language policy, and a useful basis for assessing language policy and language initiatives.

**Language Policy Goals: Evolution, but Progress?**

It is important to distinguish between what could be described as nominal, or perhaps articulated/stated policy goals on the one hand and implicit, or perhaps unarticulated/unstated policy goals on the other. Nominal/articulated/stated policy goals are the ones revealed by formal statements of government policy, whereas implicit/unarticulated/unstated policy goals are revealed by the actual content of legislation, administrative practice, and so forth. In my view, the implicit/unarticulated/unstated policy goals are usually the more important, and these are the ones upon which I shall focus.

Until very recently, there was no nominal/stated/articulated state policy with regard to Gaelic at all. There is, however, always an implicit/unarticulated/unstated language policy, and that language policy with respect to Gaelic could best be described as one of “malign neglect.” Under such a policy, the language is not generally proscribed or actively repressed in many domains, but it is robbed of any significant place in the educational system or any higher-status domains, and bears a social stigma that is fostered in part by state educational and other policies. For example, one aspect of state policy with respect to Gaelic since about the 1870s (if not before) has been the promotion of English-language skills amongst Gaelic-speakers with a view to fully integrating them, and the communities in which they live, more fully into the British state. Such a policy could, from one perspective, be considered to be enlightened—in an overwhelmingly English-speaking state such as Britain, the acquisition of English-language skills for monolingual

\textsuperscript{15} The 2001 Census did reveal that there were a further 6,193 people who could read Gaelic but could not speak it.
\textsuperscript{16} Supra, note 28.
Gaelic-speakers allows full participation in political, economic and social life in the wider society. However, a key issue is whether the policies promote what may be described as “additive” or “subtractive” bilingualism and a stable or unstable diglossic situation. It is, of course, that where there is such a massive power differential between languages as exists in the UK between Gaelic and English that any attempt to promote bilingualism amongst native Gaelic-speakers will necessarily be subtractive and any diglossia unstable. However, until recently, state policy promoted a strongly subtractive bilingualism and therefore a highly unstable diglossia, and this is clearly shown in the census data discussed above.

The clearest illustration of this is in respect of education policy. In the nineteenth century, there developed a fairly widespread network of charitable schools, mainly run by Protestant Churches or charitable institutions linked to them, which generally operated through Gaelic. The Education Act 1872, which introduced universal state-funded education in Scotland, resulted in the replacement of such schools by state schools. However, the act made no provision for Gaelic; indeed, throughout most of the next one hundred and fifteen years, Gaelic was actively discouraged in state schools. Although a 1918 amendment to the Education Act allowed for the teaching of Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas, this provision was aimed as much at promoting transitional bilingualism to ensure more effective acquisition of English as at enhancing students’ competence in Gaelic. As a result, state-supported English-medium education in Gaelic-speaking Scotland had a dramatic and highly negative impact on retention and intergenerational transmission of Gaelic.17

This approach has generally been reflected in other aspects of state policy. Indeed, the penetration of the modern administrative state, modern communications media such as the radio and television, and the modern economy into Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland has generally been through the medium of English alone. This pattern of language contact with English, which has seen the monopolisation by English of almost all linguistic domains outside of the informal networks of family and community, has taken its toll on the Gaelic language.

Since the mid-1970s, a somewhat more supportive language policy, both stated and implicit, has begun to emerge. Local government reorganisation in the mid-1970s led to the creation of a local authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, that included most of the remaining districts in which Gaelic was spoken by the majority of the population, and this allowed for the development of a bilingualism project which was the first experiment in Gaelic-medium education, and the creation of a Gaelic policy for the authority itself. It must be said, though, that this Gaelic policy did not create hard obligations with respect to the provision of Gaelic-medium services, and even this relatively limited policy has generally not been implemented. In the early 1980s, the construction of a network of Gaelic-medium pre-school classes was commenced, and through the agency of the

Highlands and Islands Development Board, now Highlands and Islands Enterprise (“HIE”), a government economic and social development agency, the Gaelic development agency Comunn na Gàidhlig (“CNAG”) was formed in 1984.

In 1985, the first Gaelic-medium primary school classes were established in Glasgow and Inverness, and in 1986, the British government, through the Scottish Office, established a fund to provide grants to support the development of Gaelic-medium educational initiatives by local authorities and other bodies. This so-called “Gaelic-specific grant” scheme assisted local authorities with the costs of setting up additional Gaelic-medium classes, and allowed for a steady expansion in classes and student numbers over the subsequent years, right up to the present. In 2003-04 there were 1,972 primary school students studying through the medium of Gaelic at 59 schools which have Gaelic-medium classes and at the one-Gaelic medium school in Scotland, in Glasgow. It is possible to do parts of the secondary curriculum through the medium of Gaelic, but Gaelic-medium education is less developed and less widespread at the secondary level: only 288 students did some of their education through the medium of Gaelic at 15 secondary schools. It must be recognised, however, that the numbers of students in Gaelic-medium education are very low, and represent much less than 1% of all students as a whole; even in the Western Isles, the only local authority area in which Gaelic is spoken by majority, only about 25% of primary students study through the medium of Gaelic. Given such numbers, the education system will not be able to reverse the demographic trends, mere slow the pace of decline (as the 2001 seems to indicate).

With respect to broadcasting, the BBC has provided Gaelic-medium programming from its inception in the 1920s, but until relatively recently this has only amounted to small numbers of hours on radio. An embryonic Gaelic radio service was developed by the BBC in the late 1970s, and this service, now called Radio nan Gàidheal, was significantly expanded the late-1990s, and now broadcasts about 66 hours of Gaelic-medium programming in Gaelic per week. The BBC also produces a fairly regular output of Gaelic-medium television output—it currently averages about 150 hours per year—and has developed a comprehensive interactive website. The position of Gaelic television broadcasting was significantly enhanced with the creation under the Broadcasting Act 1990 of Comataidh Telebhisean Gàidhlig (the Gaelic Television Committee, or “CTG”). The CCG was given a fund of £8.5 million pounds out of which it could make grants to assist in the costs of producing Gaelic television programming. The Broadcasting Act 1990 also imposed requirements upon Channel 3 broadcasters in Scotland, private sector television license-holders, to broadcast Gaelic programming, including a “suitable proportion” at peak viewing times. Under the Broadcasting Act 1996, the CTG was given the remit of also funding the production of radio programming, and the fund was renamed the Comataidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig (the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee, or the “CCG”).

18. In 2003-04, there were 978 secondary students studying Gaelic as a subject for fluent speakers and 2,513 studying Gaelic as a subject for learners.
to reflect this broader remit. The inadequacies of this present structure have, however, become brutally clear, as recognised by a report commissioned by the British government itself and conducted by Alasdair Milne, a former director general of the BBC. The value of the fund distributed by the CCG (itself replaced in 2004 by a new body, Seirbhis nam Meadhanaidh, the Gaelic Media Service, or the SMG, to be discussed below) still stands at £8.5 million, meaning that its real value has been eroded by about a third. The CCG could only fund the production of programmes, but had to rely on broadcasters—the BBC and Channel 3 licence-holders in Scotland—to broadcast them. Although the BBC has somewhat expanded its television output, the Channel 3 broadcasters have generally cut back, especially in respect of their peak time obligations, and have made clear that they wish to be freed from these obligations altogether.

To summarise, from the 1970s, local government policy, at least in the Hebrides, and from the 1980s national government policy has provided some degree of support to Gaelic. However, aside from the expressions of goodwill that accompanied the sorts of measures just described, the public policy objectives which underlay such initiatives were neither articulated nor even considered. Supportive rhetoric was generally not accompanied by more detailed policy statements, and sensible and clear development strategies were not developed.

Factors Currently Impinging on Gaelic Language Policy

Since the late 1990s, there have been a number of broader developments which have important implications for Gaelic language policy, the most important of which have been Scottish devolution and the assumption by the UK of some important international legal obligations which have relevance for Gaelic.

Scottish Devolution

Scottish devolution of 1999 has created both new opportunities and new challenges for Gaelic language policy. Under the Scotland Act 1998, the new Scottish Parliament has the power to pass legislation over a wide range of policy matters, including education, the health system, local government and a broad range of public services. It can therefore legislate with respect to many policy areas of crucial importance to Gaelic language development. However, legislative power with respect to broadcasting and certain other policy areas, such as social security, has been reserved to Westminster. To the extent that Gaelic policy involves such policy areas, only Westminster, and not the Scottish Parliament, can act.

Since about the mid-1980s, the Westminster Parliament and Whitehall departments have been willing to take measures in respect of Gaelic; indeed, virtually all of the measures of support for Gaelic described above are the result of Westminster initiatives. However, Gaelic was always a marginal issue at Westminster. Scottish devolution has allowed considerably more parliamentary time and attention to be spent on so-called
“Scottish” matters that received less attention on the busy Westminster docket. Gaelic is one such matter. The Scottish Parliament has had several occasions to debate aspects of Gaelic policy, and the relatively more open procedural rules of the Scottish Parliament, its “Standing Orders” have a mechanism, the public petitions process, that allows the public to raise matters before the parliament, and this has been done on a couple of occasions with respect to Gaelic. While the Scotland Act 1998 made no reference to Gaelic, the Standing Orders of the Parliament allow for the use of Gaelic in the parliament and its committees, and where the language is used, the Gaelic transcription, together with a transcription of the simultaneous English translation, appears in the Official Record. Much of the signage of the parliament building is bilingual, the parliament’s website contains considerable Gaelic material, and the parliament has hired two Gaelic officers to support the use of Gaelic in and by the Parliament in dealing with the Gaelic public and press.

Until recently, though, devolution has promised more than it has delivered. The first Scottish Parliament, from 1999 to May, 2003, saw increases in funding to many existing initiatives, but very few new initiatives from the Scottish Executive, the devolved government. Parliamentary debates elicited anodyne expressions of goodwill towards the language, but no clear, detailed and comprehensive statements of policy. In terms of legislative measures, the Scottish Executive generally followed, rather than lead. In June, 1999, CNAG delivered a set of proposals for a Gaelic Language Act to Alasdair Morrison, a native Gaelic-speaker and Junior Minister in the Executive with responsibility for Gaelic, but the Executive did not act on these proposals during the first Parliament. In the winter of 2000, the Executive brought forward a bill on education which became the Standards in Scotland’s Schools (etc.) Act 2000, and CNAG and other Gaelic bodies lobbied the Executive to amend this legislation to include a right to Gaelic-medium primary and secondary education where there was sufficient demand, one of the core aspects of the CNAG language act proposals. The Scottish Executive offered amendments that would require local education authorities to report on what provision they have made for Gaelic-medium education and on the ways and circumstances in which they would expand such provision, but opposed an amendment brought by a Liberal Democrat and Scottish National Party member to enshrine a right, and this amendment was ultimately rejected.

The defeat of the opposition amendment created considerable disappointment in the Gaelic community, and a growing sense of frustration at the slowness with which the Scottish Executive seemed to be moving. For example, during this period, Mr. Morrison established not one but two consecutive task forces to look into Gaelic; both recommended similar measures, including the establishment of a language body to oversee Gaelic language planning, and a language act. In October, 2002, the Scottish Executive responded to the first of these recommendations by establishing Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba), a Gaelic Language Board, as a Non-Departmental Public Body, but demurred on a language act. Once again, the opposition laid down the gauntlet; in the autumn of 2002, Michael Russell of the SNP introduced a Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill; although it
won the support of the Scottish Parliament in principle, it died on the order paper when the first parliament rose in April, 2003.

In the 2003 Scottish Parliamentary elections, however, three out of the four major parties in Scotland made a manifesto commitment to create a Gaelic language act, and the agreement in which the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats entered into a coalition government, and the First Minister’s subsequent statement on the Executive’s legislative programme both provided the following:

We believe that the Gaelic language is important to all of Scotland and is a unique part of our culture and heritage. To underpin the support that we will give to the language, we will legislate to give Gaelic secure status—enshrining the Gaelic language in Scots law for the first time.

In October, 2003, the Scottish Executive introduced a Consultation Paper on a Gaelic Language Bill, together with a consultation draft of the Bill. The Consultation Draft contained perhaps the clearest and most detailed description yet of the Executive’s policy:

The Scottish Executive is committed to delivering a Gaelic Language Act. The Executive recognises that this is clearly the expressed wish of the Gaelic community. The Bill is also intended to secure the place of the Gaelic language as a living part of Scottish life, to promote the use of Gaelic in Scotland, and increase the appreciation of its place and value in Scottish culture.

The Consultation Draft elicited an unprecedented response; where something in excess of 100 responses is considered to be good, over 3,000 responses had been received in respect of the Gaelic Bill by the time the consultation period closed, on 9 January, 2004. The overwhelming majority supported legislation, but most supported a much stronger piece of legislation. In response, the Scottish Executive introduced a stronger version of the Bill to the Scottish Parliament, and the final debate on this Bill will take place in less than three weeks’ time, on 21 April, 2005, at which time the bill is expected to be passed into law. April 21 will therefore be an historic milestone in the history of the language. I shall take a closer look at this Bill in the next section of this paper.

**International Commitments**

A second major factor affecting Gaelic language policy has been the assumption by the UK government of important international commitments in respect of its minority languages, including Gaelic. The most important of these commitments are those under two Council of Europe treaties, the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (the “Framework Convention”), which the United Kingdom ratified on 15 January, 1998 and came into force for the UK on 1 May, 1998, and the *European Charter*
for Regional or Minority Languages (the “Languages Charter”), which the UK ratified on 27 March, 2001, and which entered into force for the UK on 1 July, 2001. Of these two, the European Charter is of somewhat greater significance to Gaelic, as British ratification creates somewhat more extensive and detailed obligations than the relevant Framework Convention provisions.

Part II of the Languages Charter contains a number of objectives and principles on which the UK must base its policies, legislation and practice in relation to all its regional and minority languages, Gaelic included. Amongst these are the following: a recognition of Gaelic as an expression of cultural wealth; the need for resolute action to promote Gaelic in order to safeguard it; the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of Gaelic, in speech and writing, in public and private life; and, the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of Gaelic at all appropriated stages.20 Given the historical lack of a nominal/articulated/stated state policy with respect to Gaelic, noted earlier in this presentation, these principles and objectives, contained in a binding international treaty, represent an important step forward. They represent the minimum standards which should inform Gaelic language policy of the British government and, by implication, of the devolved Scottish institutions.

Part III of the Languages Charter is potentially even more important, however, in that it contains a range of more detailed measures to promote regional or minority languages. These measures are contained in seven separate articles and sixty-five separate paragraphs and subparagraphs relating to education, judicial authorities, administrative authorities and public services, the media, cultural activities and facilities, economic and social life, and transfrontier exchanges.21 The UK designated Gaelic in Scotland, along with Welsh in Wales and Irish in Northern Ireland, as regional or minority languages to which Part III applied, and undertook obligations in respect of Gaelic under thirty-nine paragraphs and subparagraphs of Part III. Perhaps the most significant of these commitments were in respect of education and the media. In respect of education, the UK generally undertook the most demanding of the optional paragraphs in paragraph 1 of Article 8; for example, it undertook, within the territory in which Gaelic is used, to make available pre-school, primary and secondary education in Gaelic.22 In respect of media, the UK undertook, within the territories in which Gaelic is spoken, to encourage and/or facilitate the creation of at least one radio station and one television channel in Gaelic.23

The implementation of the Languages Charter is monitored by a system of State reporting under which states which are party to the treaty must make an initial report on the measures they are taking to implement their obligations within one year of coming

20. Article 7, paragraph 1 a, c, d, and f, respectively.
21. Articles 8 through 14, respectively.
22. Article 8, paragraph 1 a i, b i, and c i.
23. Article 11, subparagraph 1 a ii.
into force of the treaty for that state, and every three years thereafter. The treaty creates a Committee of Experts (“Comex”), which conducts an examination of the State report; in carrying out its work, Comex is able to receive representations from NGOs and to conduct an on-the-spot visit of the state being monitored. It produces a report for the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on State compliance, together with proposals for recommendations to the State party which may be made by the Committee of Ministers. The UK initial state report was submitted to the Council of Europe on 1 July, 2002, and on 24 March, 2004, Comex released its report and proposals for recommendations, which proposals formed the basis of the subsequent recommendations of the Committee of Ministers to the UK. Both the Comex report and the Committee of Ministers recommendations were critical of several aspects of UK implementation of its obligations in respect of Gaelic; particular attention was directed at shortcomings in the provision of primary and secondary education, and the failure of the UK to establish a Gaelic television service, an aspect of the report and recommendations to which I shall return momentarily. While there is no mechanism by which the UK can be compelled to comply with these recommendations, they are of considerable political value and have proven useful to the Gaelic community in pressing the case for further action in respect of Gaelic. The Languages Charter has been frequently referred to in the course of the progress of the Scottish Executive’s Gaelic Language Bill, including by the Parliamentary Committee that was charged with scrutinising the bill on its course through the parliament.

The Quixotic Implications of these Developments: The Case of Broadcasting

I shall conclude this section of the paper with a somewhat closer look at the rather complex interaction of the themes that I have been addressing thusfar: the lack of a nominal/articulated/stated language policy, devolution, and international commitments. I shall do so by making particular reference to broadcasting policy, which is particularly illustrative of these themes.

The importance of broadcasting in the preservation and promotion of minoritised languages is a matter of some debate. Without question, the broadcast media has a powerful impact in modern society, and modern communications media penetrates even the most remote household. It is therefore widely accepted that it is crucial for minoritised languages to establish a presence in these media. While not rejecting the importance of the media in the preservation and promotion of minority languages, Joshua Fishman, in particular, has cautioned against a premature and excessive reliance on the broadcast media, in particular, in any minority language policy.

In spite of this, very heavy reliance has been placed on the broadcast media, and in particular, on television, in Gaelic minority language policy. Indeed, the two cornerstones of existing policy has been the extension of Gaelic-medium education, especially at the pre-school and primary school level, and television and radio broadcasting. With
the Gaelic Language Act, another pillar will, as we shall see in a moment, be added: the promotion of the use of Gaelic in the public sector. The lack of any nominal/articulated/stated Gaelic language policy, however, has meant that the appropriateness of this approach has never been fully considered. Development has tended to be *ad hoc*, with an insufficient discussion of which model or models of minority language development should be followed. Certainly, the heavy emphasis on the primary school as the centre-piece of acquisition planning and on broadcasting as the centrepiece of use planning is somewhat at variance with the model Prof. Fishman has advocated. The existence of a nominal/articulated/stated language policy does not, as already noted, guarantee that the implicit/unarticulated/unstated policy will be the same. And a nominal policy may not necessarily be a good policy. But the lack of nominal policy does, I suggest, hinder the development of a co-ordinated vision and approach that can pull together different aspects of policy.

Devolution has further complicated matters, and to a certain extent makes the development of that co-ordinated vision and approach even more difficult. At present, Gaelic-medium education is largely in the hands of local education authorities, and there are relatively minimal statutory obligations which guide and constrain them. Other aspects of policy are largely in the hands of the Scottish Parliament, and they have established Bòrd na Gàidhlig to take the lead on such matters, but at present, the Bòrd itself has no statutory powers. Given that these matters are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, the parliament can, if it wishes, bring greater coherence to bear, and I shall explore briefly, in the next section, how the parliament is seeking to do so in the Gaelic Language Bill presently before the Parliament. But broadcasting remains a matter for Westminster alone, and therefore the possibility of integrating Gaelic broadcasting policy with other aspects of Gaelic policy is limited by this fundamental jurisdictional problem. I have also discussed the importance of the UK’s international commitments, in particular, the Languages Charter, in guiding policy. However, the detailed obligations under Part III of the Charter are determined by Whitehall in London, which has the sole competence to enter into and amend treaty obligations. Thus, Westminster has the power to determine important international commitments with respect to Gaelic language policy, and yet many aspects of those commitments, such as education, public services, and so forth, are within the legislative jurisdiction of and are to be delivered through the Scottish Parliament and Executive.

As noted above, there is general recognition that the present structure for Gaelic broadcasting is inadequate. The UK government committed itself under the Languages Charter to encourage and/or facilitate the creation of at least one Gaelic-medium television channel. The Comex report was critical of the UK’s failure to progress this commitment. Broadcasting is clearly within the legislative remit of Westminster, and in 2003, Westminster moved some of the way to addressing this issue, with the passage of the *Broadcasting Act 2003*. Under that act, the CCG was, as noted, replaced by a new organisation, the SMG, the Gaelic Media Service, of which I am a member. One of the historical impediments to the creation of a Gaelic television channel was that the CCG
could fund the production of Gaelic-medium programming, but could not actually broadcast such programming; it was dependent on broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 3 licensees in Scotland to do so. The Broadcasting Act 2003 has significantly broadened the powers of the SMG. In particular, the 2003 legislation specifies that the functions of the SMG shall be to secure that a wide and diverse range of high quality Gaelic programmes are broadcast, and in carrying out its functions, the SMG may finance, or engage in the making of programmes with a view to their being broadcast. Thus, the possibility now exists for the SMG to apply itself for a broadcast license and to run a service. The remaining roadblock is money. The present annual funding of the SMG of £8.5 million is insufficient to allow for the creation of a Gaelic channel which could broadcast even a small number of hours daily. Given that the annual funding of the SMG and the CCG before it has not been adjusted for inflation, fewer and fewer hours of Gaelic television programming can be funded each year. Even if the value of the fund was adjusted for inflation, as the SMG has argued, it would still be only about £12.8 million, and insufficient for a new channel.

Prior to devolution, the CCG was funded out of the annual grant to the Scottish Office, the Whitehall department which implemented policy in Scotland. With devolution, virtually all of the administrative duties of the Scottish Office were transferred to the Scottish Executive, and the Scottish Executive began providing the CCG with its annual funding out of the block grant that the Executive receives from Westminster. Thusfar, Westminster has argued that it has insufficient resources to increase the amount of money available to the GMS, and that if an increase is to occur, it should be out of the funds provided to the Scottish Executive from the block grant. The Executive has argued that, as the devolved institutions have no jurisdiction over broadcasting, they are unable to provide funding out of general revenues.

The final point is that the jurisdictional separation of Gaelic broadcasting policy from wider aspects of Gaelic language policy has other implications for that wider policy. At present, more money is spent on Gaelic broadcasting than on any other aspect of Gaelic development, and if a channel is created, the funding gap will widen. Decisions with respect to Gaelic broadcasting will have a potentially large impact on Gaelic development more generally; for example, the decision as to where to locate television production can have a potent impact on particular districts. Under the Broadcasting Act 2003, one of the members of the SMG is required to be a representative of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, meaning that the most important Gaelic development agency and the Bòrd are institutionally linked to a certain degree. This does not, however, mean that the work of the two bodies will necessarily be co-ordinated.

A Gaelic Language Act: Opportunities and Challenges

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill (the “Gaelic Bill”) currently before the Scottish Parliament will be the single most important piece of legislation in the history of the language. However, legislating for a seriously minoritised language such as Gaelic present-
ed a number of difficulties, the most significant of which related to the demographics described at the outset of this presentation. Given the fact that significant numbers of Gaelic speakers lived outside the so-called heartlands, and that Gaelic was historically much more widespread in Scotland than it is today, the Gaelic community aspired to legislation that was national in scope, and the Scottish Executive accepted this aspiration. However, outside of the Western Isles and a few communities in other parts of the Hebrides, Gaelic is spoken by very small percentages in most areas of Scotland. In some parts of Scotland, there is a feeling that the language has never formed part of the local heritage. Thus, any minority language legislation would have to take into consideration and respond to much different local circumstances, in terms of demand and the willingness to countenance significant Gaelic-medium services. Furthermore, the age demographics of the language mean that the labour pool available to implement any legislation is limited. Finally, the Scottish Executive has consistently resisted the creation of any regime of minority language “rights”; they have justified this reluctance by the fear that, given the relatively limited labour pool, it may be possible that any such rights could not be filled.

The result of the foregoing considerations is a rather flexible piece of legislation that is modelled to a certain extent on the Welsh Language Act 1993, although it is in many ways of somewhat more limited effect. Like the Welsh Language Act 1993, though, the Gaelic Bill places a language development body, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, on statutory footing, and has as its heart a scheme for the creation of language plans by public bodies. Unlike the Welsh Language Act 1993, the Gaelic Bill requires the production and regular revision of a national language plan, and it also contains provisions on Gaelic education.

Under the Gaelic Bill, the Bòrd is given four general functions. The first of these is to promote the use and understanding of the Gaelic language and Gaelic culture. The second is to advise (either on request or when the Bòrd itself thinks fit) the Scottish Executive, public bodies and other persons exercising functions of a public nature on matters relating to the Gaelic language, education and culture. The third is to advise (on request only) other persons—say, private and voluntary sector bodies—on matters relating to the Gaelic language, education and culture. The fourth is to monitor and report to the Scottish Executive on the implementation of the Languages Charter in relation to the Gaelic language. All of these functions are to be exercised by the Bòrd “with a view to securing the status of the Gaelic language as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language” in three ways: first, through increasing the number of persons who are able to use and understand Gaelic; second, through encouraging the use and understanding of Gaelic; and, third, facilitating access, in Scotland and elsewhere, to the Gaelic language and Gaelic culture.

24. Subsection 1(2), the Gaelic Bill.
25. Subsection 1(3), the Gaelic Bill.
The precise legal implications of the foregoing description of the Bòrd’s functions are not clear. However, these provisions do not make Gaelic an official language of Scotland, nor do they require that Gaelic be treated with equal respect to English. They merely create principles by which the Bòrd is to discharge its functions.

Within one year of the coming into force of the Gaelic Bill and every five years thereafter, the Bòrd is required to prepare a National Gaelic language plan, which the Scottish Executive must approve, or approve with such amendments as they see fit, within specified periods. Thus, for the first time, Gaelic development will be guided by an articulated plan, and one which is backed up by ministerial approval. But what is the status and effect of this national plan? How will it be implemented? The Gaelic Bill also provides for the preparation of language plans by public bodies, and it is intended that many aspects of the national plan will be implemented through such policies.

The scheme for the preparation by public bodies of Gaelic language plans is inspired by the Welsh Language Act 1993. As under that act, the Bòrd has the power to give notice to any Scottish public authority to prepare a Gaelic language plan. Unlike the Welsh Language Act 1993, however, the Bòrd’s discretion is not unlimited; in deciding whether to give such a notice, the Bòrd must have regard to the most recent national Gaelic language plan, the extent to which Gaelic is used by persons in relation to whom the functions of the public authority are exercisable, and the extent to which there is, in the Bòrd’s opinion, potential for the authority to develop the use of Gaelic in connection with the exercise of its functions. The Bòrd must also consider any guidance provided by the Scottish Executive.

With regard to the basic content of any Gaelic language plan, the Gaelic Bill differs in some respects from the Welsh Language Act 1993. Under that act, the language plans of public bodies must reflect the principle that, so far as is both appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable, the English and Welsh languages should be treated on the basis of equality. The Gaelic Bill establishes no such generally principle. It does require, though, that the Gaelic language plan of every Scottish public authority must contain such information as is prescribed in regulations made by the Scottish Executive. In preparing its plan, the Scottish public authority must also have regard to the following: the most recent national Gaelic language plan; the extent to which persons who use the public authority’s services are Gaelic speakers; the potential for developing the use of Gaelic in connection with such services; any representations made by the public; and any guidance provided by the Scottish Executive and by the Bòrd.

A Scottish public authority that receives a notice can appeal to the Scottish Executive against the notice on the basis that the Bòrd’s decision to give the notice was unreasonable. Under the Welsh Language Act 1993, a public body can appeal the timing of the preparation of a language plan, but not the obligation itself. Under the Gaelic Bill, where no appeal is made or where such an appeal is unsuccessful, the Scottish public authority must produce a Gaelic language plan, and the Bòrd has the power to approve
or amend the plan. Once again, the Scottish public authority has the ability to appeal the Bòrd decision to the Scottish Executive.

Finally, the Gaelic Bill makes some provision for Gaelic education. “Gaelic education” for these purposes is defined very broadly, and includes not only the teaching of Gaelic as a subject but also Gaelic-medium education. As noted earlier, the Standards in Scotland’s Schools (etc.) Act 2000 created an obligation on local education authorities to provide an annual account of the ways in which or the circumstances in which they will provide Gaelic-medium education and, where they do provide such education, to provide an annual account of the ways they will seek to develop such provision. Under the Gaelic Bill, the Bòrd can prepare guidance for local education authorities, and in providing their annual account, they are now required to have regard to any such guidance. The Bòrd can also require an education authority to prepare a Gaelic language plan.

One obvious shortcoming of the Gaelic Bill is that it creates no rights for Gaelic speakers; in this respect, it is also similar to the Welsh Language Act 1993, which creates only one right, the right to use Welsh in the courts. As is the case under the Welsh Language Act 1993, the Gaelic Bill seeks to promote the use of the minority language by requiring public bodies to prepare language plans under which they undertake to provide certain services to the public through the medium of the minoritised language. This approach is subject to the criticism that members of the minority language community have no entitlement to minority language services, and only obtain such services to the extent that the language board is willing to require a public body to undertake to provide such services, and only to the extent determined appropriate by the board. There are also a number of difficulties in enforcing compliance with these plans. The Gaelic Bill does permit the Bòrd to investigate implementation by public bodies of their language plans, but the only remedy where the Bòrd is of the view that the plan is not being implemented is to report to the Scottish Executive, providing a copy to the Scottish Parliament; at this point, it is up to the Scottish Executive to act. It is not clear how effective this compliance mechanism will be, but it is certainly potentially less effective than a judicially enforceable language rights regime.

However, the process created under the Gaelic Bill also allows for the language planning body, in this case, the Bòrd, to engage in a process of holistic language planning. Under a rights model, the right to a particular service through a minority language must be explicitly specified, or the service is not available. The process initiated by the Gaelic Bill is much more flexible, and this has the virtue of allowing the Bòrd to impose a potentially wider range of obligations on a wider range of public sector bodies. For example, by requiring bodies such as economic and social development agencies, health care bodies, and so forth, to prepare language plans, the Gaelic Bill allows for the Bòrd to implement much more coherent and widespread language regime in particular locales than a rights regime may have permitted. This is particularly important in the so-called Gaelic heartlands, remote areas facing both linguistic decline and a broader population decline due to difficult economic circumstances. It is, of course, quite common that threatened
linguistic minorities also live in economically marginal areas. Too often, however, economic development policies have paid little attention to language issues, with the result that economic development strategies often have an inimical impact on the minority language. This has often been true of the Highlands and Islands: economic development strategies have often attracted non-Gaelic speaking incomers who tilt the linguistic balance in a way that is inimical to the minority language. Similarly, language policy initiatives often pay scant attention to wider economic and social policy initiatives which can have a dramatic impact on language policy. The planning model that is set out in the Gaelic Bill will allow the Bòrd to develop a more integrated approach, by enabling the Bòrd to require government economic development agencies such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise (“HIE”) and its Local Enterprise Company (“LEC”) network, local authority economic development and planning bodies, tourism agencies and so forth, to prepare Gaelic language plans which, in addition to requiring greater use of Gaelic, would require greater consideration of the linguistic implications of their core activities.

The language planning model set out in the Gaelic Bill has other potential advantages. By permitting the occasional revision of language plans, it institutes an incremental and dynamic approach to language planning which allows the range of services to be extended and deepened over time. The model instituted under the Gaelic Bill also allows the Bòrd to make decisions about the appropriate allocation of scarce linguistic resources, all within the framework of a national plan that will guide the roll-out of public sector language plans. While no rights to Gaelic education are created, the planning mechanism that the Gaelic Bill introduces can allow for a much more integrated approach to acquisition planning than has existed to date, by empowering the Bòrd to issue guidance to local education authorities and to require such authorities to produce a language plan. Finally, the demographic situation described at the outset raises very difficult issues. Because Gaelic speakers are found in all parts of Scotland, and because almost half of Gaelic speakers live outside the “heartlands”, a national approach was required. However, because of very small numbers, both in absolute and proportional terms, in many such areas, the same level of Gaelic services would simply not be possible. A rights regime could potentially deal with this difficulty by having any right to services made contingent on sufficiency of local demand for such services. But, the setting of appropriate levels of demand in a demographic context as complex as that which exists for Gaelic in Scotland would be difficult and controversial.

There are, though, some dangers. The Welsh model upon which the Gaelic Bill is largely based has, in my view, been reasonably successful in ensuring that a significantly wider range of public services is available through the medium of Welsh, in raising the visibility of the Welsh language, and in helping to promote the acquisition of the language. It has permitted the sort of holistic planning that I have just referred to. However, a number of crucial conditions exist in Wales which may not exist in Scotland. First, there are the obvious demographic differences: Welsh is spoken by over ten times as many people, and 20% of the population of the jurisdiction, not 1.2%, as is the case with Gaelic. Second, there are attitudinal differences: there is a much more widespread acceptance of
the place of the Welsh language in society than exists for Gaelic. Third, there are the contextual differences: the Welsh model is based on a much longer and more intense history of language activism and development. Fourth, the Welsh model shows that, if a language body is to take the lead, it must be appropriately resourced. It must enjoy a reasonably high level of support and trust in the language community itself. It must earn a reputation for competence and sensitivity amongst the public bodies with which it works in the development of language plans. Crucially, it must have the political support from the Executive that ensures that it carries some weight when it deals with public bodies. It is too early to tell whether any of these conditions exist in Scotland.

There are further limitations to the model set out in the Gaelic Bill. One is a limitation that is shared to a very significant degree with most language rights models. This is that the obligations imposed by the Gaelic Bill are limited to public bodies. The Gaelic Bill, like the Welsh Language Act 1993, does not permit the Bòrd to require private and voluntary sector bodies to prepare language plans. This is a significant limitation on the holistic nature of the language planning that the Bòrd can engage in, although it can potentially have an indirect impact on the private and voluntary sector to the extent that it can impose through obligations through public sector language plans on public bodies which deal with, regulate and provide assistance, such as grants, to the private and voluntary sector.

A second limitation that the planning approach anticipated by the Gaelic Bill and language rights regimes share is that both can create the possibility for speakers of the minority language to receive public services through the minority language, but speakers of the minority language may not take advantage of these opportunities. This is a significant problem for many seriously minoritised languages such as Gaelic in which all speakers of the language are completely fluent in the dominant language, and in which a certain pattern of diglossia is firmly established. Gaelic speakers have for generations become accustomed to interacting with public bodies through the medium of English; they therefore not only feel more comfortable and confident in using English, they may believe that they and their language is incapable of use in such prestigious domains. Furthermore, given that Gaelic has, for the large majority of Gaelic speakers, not been taught in the school or has only be used to teach literature, Gaelic-speakers tend to be unequipped with the technical vocabulary in Gaelic that would be necessary in dealing with the public sector. A significant number of Gaelic speakers are illiterate in their own language, which poses an insuperable barrier to the use of Gaelic language written services. Finally, as Gaelic has been excluded from most domains relevant to public administration, law and government, the language itself lacks an appropriate and widely accepted and understood technical vocabulary of relevance to many public services. Thus, the focus of the minority language policy on public sector services faces a number of very significant barriers, and these would exist regardless of whether a rights regime is used. If Gaelic speakers had “language rights”—a rights-based entitlement to public services, there is no greater likelihood that they would, or could, take advantage of this opportunity. In these circumstances, the minority language policy must itself be more holistic. In
addition to focusing on the development of minority language public services, it must also consider acquisition planning, use planning and corpus planning issues. With regard to corpus planning, attention must be paid to lexical development, to ensure that there is a comprehensive and attractive vocabulary for all the domains in which status planning is being carried out. Second, these lexical developments have to be disseminated as widely as possible in the Gaelic community, and where, as is the case for Gaelic, most speakers are past school age, special strategies must be developed to facilitate dissemination. Also, a literacy strategy is absolutely essential. Finally, with respect to use planning, in addition to creating the opportunities for using the minority, whether through a rights regime or one similar to the approach taken in the Gaelic Bill and the *Welsh Language Act 1993*, a strategy for changing deeply ingrained attitudes to language use in public sector contexts must be initiated. Again, schools may be helpful in this regard, but the majority of Gaelic speakers are beyond school age, and this will be the case for some time to come. All of these matters are, however, ones which any legislative regime, whether rights-based or otherwise, must grapple, and legislation is, unfortunately, not always ideally suited for doing so.

**Canadian Language Policy and Gaelic**

I shall conclude with a brief word on Gaelic in Canada. As a result of large-scale emigration in the final decades of the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth century, Gaelic-speaking communities were established in many parts of Canada. Glengarry County, Ontario, much of Prince Edward Island and eastern Nova Scotia, the Eastern Townships of Quebec, the Red River valley of Manitoba, and many other parts of the country were settled by Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. It is estimated that in the 1880s, there were between 80,000 and 100,000 Gaelic-speakers in eastern Nova Scotia alone, and it is likely that until the late nineteenth century, Gaelic was the third most widely spoken language in Canada, after French and English. Canada’s first two Prime Ministers were reputed to have been Gaelic speakers, and in 1891, a Bill was introduced into the Canadian Senate to make Gaelic an official language of the Canadian Parliament. The Bill did not pass, but its very existence attests to how widely spoken the language was.

The forces which led to the decline of Gaelic in Canada are varied, but there are some similarities with the experience in the old country. In the mid-nineteenth century, legislation of the Nova Scotia legislature allowed for the language to be taught in Nova Scotia schools, but such provisions were never put into effect, and the Nova Scotia schools became strongly English-speaking and promoted subtractive bilingualism. As in Scotland, the penetration of the modern state and the integration into wider society was almost exclusively through the medium of English only. As a result, Canada’s many Gaelic-speaking communities have suffered an even more precipitous decline than those in Scotland. It is estimated that in Eastern Nova Scotia, numbers of Gaelic speakers dropped by 50% in every decade since the 1890s with the result that even in Cape Breton, the only place in which anything approaching a Gaelic “community” remains,
the language is on the brink of extinction. It is estimated that even here, only 500 Gaelic speakers remain in Nova Scotia, and that the great majority are over 50.

Gaelic in Nova Scotia has received some sporadic institutional support from both the federal and provincial governments. In the late 1930s, a Gaelic College was established at St. Ann’s Cape Breton, and summer courses in Gaelic and occasional Gaelic immersion events are held there. The college’s core funding comes from the provincial government. Federal multiculturalism programmes have also provided occasional support to Gaelic initiatives. From 1978 to 1983, federal funding was instrumental in the establishment of a Gaelic Folklore Project, based at St. Francis Xavier University. Over 2,000 separate items were recorded from over 100 Gaelic-speaking informants, and this exceptionally rich collection has been the basis for at least three publications of Gaelic oral tradition. The Multiculturalism directorate of the federal government also played a part in the creation of the Chair of Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier, in 1984.

Under the leadership of Rodney MacDonald, the Minister of Culture in the Nova Scotia government, the province has recently shown renewed interest in the issue of Gaelic language maintenance. In 1999, the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture commissioned a study, with the following aims: (1) to describe the historical context of Gaelic language and culture in Nova Scotia; (2) to create an inventory of current resources for, and opportunities to participate in, Gaelic language and cultural activities; (3) to assess the economic contribution of Gaelic language and cultural activities in the province; and (4), to assess the potential of Gaelic cultural resources and activities as a tourism product. The report was conducted by Dr. Mike Kennedy, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, and completed his work in the Spring of 2001. The report argued that Gaelic language and culture—admittedly, broadly defined for these purposes—generates over $23.5 million in direct revenues per year, and that there was significant potential of Gaelic cultural resources as a tourism product. Since the completion of the report, the Department of Tourism and Culture has taken additional steps. It has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Highland Council in Scotland, to promote further Gaelic and Gaelic-related endeavours. In 2003, it appointed the province’s first Gaelic Development Officer. In 2004, Minister MacDonald announced $100,000 in funding for Gaelic-related language and cultural initiatives. With support from the Department, in April, 2004, Gaelic organisations active in the province launched Developing and Preserving Gaelic in Nova Scotia: Strategy for a Community-Based Initiative. A Gaelic Studies course has been developed for secondary schools, and Gaelic is taught as a subject in a small number of Cape Breton primary and secondary schools.

The Nova Scotia experiment is an interesting one, from a number of perspectives. Gaelic has historically played an important part in the development of both Nova Scotia and Canada more generally. The fact that the language has survived for six to seven generations, and that it has developed a rich literature, both written and oral, in its new Canadian homeland challenges the division of Canada’s linguistic diversity into easily identifiable categories of official languages of Canada’s “founding cultures”, aboriginal
languages and heritage languages, and the differing levels of institutional recognition and support that comes with that classification. Canada has recognised multiculturalism in both the 1982 constitution and in federal legislation. However, the precise implications of this Canadian policy of “multiculturalism” for real linguistic as well as cultural diversity has never been clear. The case of Gaelic raises the question of what such a policy can, and should mean.