

Comhchoiste um Chur i bhFeidhm Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta 2 Márta 2021, 10am

Conradh na Gaeilge – Óráid tosaigh Dr Niall Comer, Uachtarán, Conradh na Gaeilge

‘Sé bhur mbeatha a chairde agus ar dtús is mian liom, thar ceann Chonradh na Gaeilge, buíochas a ghabháil libh as an fháilte agus an deis bheith libh inniu chun cás na Gaeilge mar atá sé ó thuaidh a phlé libh. Sula dtosaím ar an phlé sin, is ceart dom a lua, mar atá fhios agaibh, gur cuireadh tús le Seachtain na Gaeilge na bliana seo inné, 1 Márta, agus beidh féile na bliana seo ag dul ar aghaidh go Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Táimid an-sásta go bhfuil an imeacht seo ag titim amach i rith Sheachtain na Gaeilge. De dheasca chúrsaí Paidéime tá Seachtain na Gaeilge na bliana seo á reáchtáil beagnach iomlán ar líne. Beidh scoth imeachtaí ar fáil agus iarraim oraibh iarracht ar leith a dhéanamh i mbliana an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a chur chun cinn go háitiúil, sa pháirtí agus ag cruinnithe Rialtais nuair atá an deis agaibh. Beidh Conradh na Gaeilge agus foireann Sheachtain na Gaeilge ar fáil chun tacú libh sin a dhéanamh.

Mar atá fhios agaibh, baineann ár dtéama cainte agus plé inniu le ceisteanna cearta teanga ó thuaidh.

I gComhaontú Aoine an Chéasta 1998, gealladh ré úr chomhionannais don Ghaeilge ó thuaidh. Tugadh coimintí sonracha agus láidre maidir leis an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn agus a chosaint. Ina measc gealladh

- beart diongbháilte a dhéanamh leis an teanga a chur chun cinn;
- úsáid na teanga a éascú agus a chur chun cinn ó bhéal agus i scríbhinn sa saol poiblí agus príobháideach araon nuair a bhíonn an ráchairt chuí ann;
- féachaint, nuair is féidir, le constaicí a chuirfeadh beagachtach ar nó a chuirfeadh in éadan chothabháil nó forbairt na teanga a shárú;
- dualgas reachtúil a chur ar an Roinn Oideachais leis an Ghaelscolaíocht a chur chun cinn agus a éascú ar an dóigh chéanna a ndéantar i gcás an oideachais imeasctha;

In ainneoin na gcoimintí seo, cuireadh baic leanúnacha roimh phobal na Gaeilge an teanga a úsáid agus rinneadh ionsaithe leanúnacha orthu siúd a roghnaigh a saol a chaitheamh trí Ghaeilge ó la go lá. Leis sin, tháinig brú ón phobal féin cearta Gaeilge a lárú sa dlí agus reachtaíocht teanga a bhaint amach den chéad úr riamh ó thuaidh.

Ag éirí as na hiarrachtaí siúd, mar chuid de Chomhaontú Chill Rímhinn 2006 gealladh go soiléir “go dtabharfaidh [an] Rialtas [na Breataine] isteach Acht Gaeilge ina léireofar taithí na Breataine Bige agus na hÉireann agus oibreoidh sé i gcomhpháirt leis an Fheidhmeannas...le forbairt na Gaeilge a fheabhsú agus a chosaint.” Is coimintí í sin nár comhlíonadh riamh.

Ar an drochuair, faoin am a dtáinig an Toghchán Tionóil in 2016, bhí 3 iarracht cailte sa tréimhse 10 bliana sin Acht Gaeilge a thabhairt isteach. Tháinig an cheist os comhair an Tionóil trí huair, agus rinneadh comhairliúchán poiblí ar an ábhar faoi thru; gach uair, bhí tacaíocht ó thromlach mór ar son Cearta Teanga, ach cuireadh bac ar aon dul chun cinn sa Tionól féin. A bhúil le hiarrachtaí phobal na Gaeilge agus Chonradh na Gaeilge d’éirigh linn tromlach na

bpáirtithe sa Tionól a spreagadh chun tacú leis an Acht Gaeilge neamhspléach, rud arb ionann agus 50 as 90 Comhalta thar 5 pháirtí eagsúla.

Ag an phointe seo fosta a thosaigh feachtas An Dream Dearg, a threisigh an feachtas #AchtAnois, agus a thiomáin go croílár an dioscúrsa pholaitiúil é ó thuaidh agus a chuir cearta teanga ó thuaidh ar bharr chlár na gcainteanna sna próisis idirbheartaíochta idir 2017 agus 2020. Le teacht Eanáir 2020 baineadh amach coimint nua do reachtaíocht Gaeilge sa Chomhaontú “Ré Nua Cur Chuige Nua” agus fríd an reachtaíocht seo bunófaí Oifig Coimisinéara Teanga agus caighdeáin theanga “dhea-chleachtas”. Cé nach raibh gach rud ann sa chomhaontú, agus creid uainn, níl sé ar an phíosa reachtaíochta teanga is fearr a scríobhadh riamh, ná baol air, is deis atá ann fós tús dáiríre a chur le cosaint reachtúil na teanga ó thuaidh, rud atá thar a bheith stáitiúil ann féin. Bunaíodh go leor de na forálacha a cuireadh san áireamh sa reachtaíocht ar mholtaí a rinne Conradh na Gaeilge leis na páirtithe agus leis an dá rialtas le blianta anuas.

Gealladh go mbeadh an reachtaíocht teanga i bhfeidhm laistigh de 100 lá ón chomhaontú bheith aontaithe. Rud nár tharla.

Gealladh fosta go mbeadh an Straitéis Ghaeilge a gealladh, mar chuid de Chomhaontú Chill Rímhinn 2006 chomh maith, i bhfeidhm laistigh de 6 mhí. Rud nar tharla.

Breis agus bliain ar aghaidh ón Chomhaontú sin anuraidh tá pobal na Gaeilge fós ag fanacht ar chomhlíonadh coimintí. Is iad Rialtas na hÉireann agus Rialtas na Breataine comhscríbhneoirí agus comhshínitheoirí an chomhaontuithe seo, agus cé go dtiteann sé ar an Fheidhmeannas féin seo a chur i bhfeidhm, tá ról lárnach ag an dá Rialtas i bhfíorú na físe seo gan a thuilleadh moille. Mura ndéantar beart de réir briathair go fíor-luath, tá deis mhór ann go gcaillfear amach ar a reachtaíocht teanga sa mhandáid reatha ina bhfuil muid, agus má tharlaíonn sé sin, bí cinnte go mbeidh an reachtaíocht Ghaeilge mar chnámh-spairne idir na páirtithe sa chéad fheachtas toghchánaíochta eile ag tús 2021. Dhéanfadh sin dochar ollmhór don Ghaeilge agus do phobal a labhartha. Is mian linn sin a sheachaint. Déanfar sin tríd an reachtaíocht a chur i bhfeidhm anois.

Chuir sin, is mian linn iarraidh ar an Choiste seo rún a rith go rachaidh an coiste i dteagmháil leis na páirtithe leasmhara ar an dóigh seo a leanas:

- *go scríobhfar chuig an Aire Gnóthaí Eachtraí, Simon Coveney TD, chuig Rúnaí Stáit na Breataine, Brandon Lewis MP, atá beirt mar chomhshínitheoir ar na comhaontuithe éagsúla seo, agus go scríobhfar chuig Oifig an Fheidhmeannais ó thuaidh, le héileamh orthu a chinntiú go gcuirfear i bhfeidhm na reachtaíochta Gaeilge agus an Straitéis Ghaeilge a luaitear sa chomhaontú ‘Ré Nua Cur Chuige Nua’ gan a thuilleadh moille.*

Ba mhór againn dá nglacfaí leis an rún sin, agus beidh Conradh na Gaeilge sásta comhoibriú leis an Choiste na bearta sin a chur i gcrích agus in bhur gcuid iarrachtaí eile coimintí ar son na Gaeilge i gComhaontú Aoine an Chéasta a bhaint amach chomh luath agus is féidir.

Míle buíochas libh ar fad as ucht bhur gcuid ama.

Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement
2 March 2021, 10am

Conradh na Gaeilge – Opening speech
Dr Niall Comer, President, Conradh na Gaeilge

‘Greetings. Firstly I would like, on behalf of Conradh na Gaeilge, to thank you for the welcome and for the opportunity to be with you today to discuss the case of the Irish language in the North. Before I begin this discussion, I should mention, as you know, that this year’s Seachtain na Gaeilge started yesterday, 1 March, and this year’s festivities will continue until St. Patrick’s Day. We are very pleased that this event is taking place during Seachtain na Gaeilge. Because of the pandemic this year’s Seachtain na Gaeilge will be held almost entirely online. Brilliant events will be available and I ask you to make a particular effort this year to use Irish and to advance Irish locally, at party level and at Government meetings, when you have the opportunity. Conradh na Gaeilge and the Seachtain na Gaeilge team will be available to help you do so.

As you know, the theme of our talk and discussion today relates to the question of language rights in the North.

In the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a new era of equality was promised for the Irish language in the North. Specific and strong commitments were given regarding the promotion and protection of the Irish language, including:

- steadfast action to promote the language;
- to facilitate and promote the use of the language both orally and in writing in public and private life when there is appropriate demand for such;
- to seek, where possible, to overcome obstacles that would dishearten or oppose the maintenance or development of the language;
- to impose a statutory duty on the Department of Education to promote and facilitate Irish-medium education in the same way as is done in the case of integrated education;

Despite these commitments, the Irish speaking community have continuously been obstructed in using the language and continuous attacks have been made on those who choose to live their daily lives through Irish. As a result of that, pressure came from the community itself to centre Irish language rights in law and to achieve language legislation for the first time ever in the North.

Arising from those efforts, as part of the Saint Andrews Agreement of 2006 it was clearly promised that “The [British] Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the Executive to enhance and safeguard the development of the Irish language.” This commitment has never been met.

Unfortunately, by the time of the Assembly Election in 2016, no fewer than 3 opportunities to introduce an Irish Language Act were lost in that 10-year period. The question came before the assembly three times, and public

consultation was held on the subject three times; on each occasion there was support from a large majority for Language Rights, but progression was hindered in the Assembly itself. Thanks to the efforts of the Irish speaking community and Conradh na Gaeilge we managed to encourage a majority of the parties in the Assembly to support a stand-alone Irish Language Act, that is to say 50 out of 90 Members across 5 different parties.

Also at this point the 'An Dream Dearg' campaign began, which reinforced the #AchtAnois campaign, and drove it to the very centre of political discourse in the North and put language rights in the North at the top of the programme of talks in the negotiation processes between 2017 and 2020. In January 2020 a new commitment was achieved for Irish language legislation in the "New Decade, New Approach" Agreement and through this legislation the Office of Language Commissioner and "good practice" language standards would be established. Even though the agreement didn't contain everything, and believe us, it is not one of the best pieces of language legislation ever written, not even close, it is still an opportunity to put a proper start to the statutory protection of the language in the North, which is definitely historic in itself. Many of the provisions included in the legislation were based on recommendations made by Conradh na Gaeilge to the parties and to the two governments over the years.

It was promised that the language legislation would be in force within 100 days of the agreement being agreed to. This didn't happen.

A promise was given also that the promised Irish Language Strategy, also part of the Saint Andrews Agreement of 2006, would be in force within six months. This didn't happen.

More than a year on from that Agreement the Irish language community is still waiting on the commitments to be fulfilled. The Irish Government and the British Government are co-authors and so-signatories of this agreement, and even though it falls on the Executive itself to implement it, the two governments have a central role in fulfilling this vision without further delay. If actions do not follow words very soon, there is a serious possibility that its language legislation will be lost out on in the current mandate, and if that happens, rest assured that Irish language legislation will be a bone of contention between the parties in the next election campaign at the beginning of 2021. This would do huge damage to the Irish language and to the Irish speaking community. We wish to avoid that. That will be done by implementing the legislation now.

To that end, we would like to ask this Committee to pass a resolution that the committee will contact the interested parties as follows:

- *that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney TD, and British Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis MP, who are both co-signatories of these various agreements, will be written to, and that the Office of the Executive in the North will be written to, to demand that they ensure that the Irish language legislation and the Irish Language Strategy mentioned in the 'New Decade New Approach' Agreement are implemented without further delay.*

We would be delighted if this resolution were accepted, and Conradh na Gaeilge will be happy to co-operate with the Committee to bring about those measures and in your other efforts to bring about the Irish language commitments in the Good Friday Agreement as soon as possible.

Many thanks to you all for your time.