

OFCOM Public-Service Broadcasting Review

I am concerned that more space has not been dedicated to the question of provision for indigenous minoritised languages, perhaps the only area of broadcasting for which an unequivocal case in favour of public funding can be made.

Points could be raised with regard to each of the UK's autochthonous languages. A particularly blatant example of double standards is that of Scots, a speech variety with 1.5 million native speakers according to the General Register Office for Scotland which since 1999 has been recognised by the UK Government under the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Its rich literature is almost completely excluded from broadcasting schedules, which instead are given over to repeated adaptations of a small body of canonical English literature, often costume drama produced at great expense, with a marked class and geographical bias.

On this occasion, however, I should like to confine myself to Irish. Among the UK's *Abstand* minoritised languages, Irish is self-evidently the poor relation. The UK Government committed itself to Irish-language broadcasting when it signed the Good Friday Agreement, but that undertaking has yet to be honoured.

Census results confirm that there are considerably more users of Irish than of Scottish Gaelic, and yet it is the latter language that has a dedicated television station. Users of Irish in Northern Ireland are served only by spill-over from the Irish Republic or through subscription services, with no reliable, dedicated provider of terrestrial Irish-language television. I myself can see the TG4 booster transmitter from outside my house in Belfast yet can receive programming only with a larger aerial and booster, and even then only in unsatisfactory quality.

Provision for Irish has been limited to a small amount of programming produced by BBC Northern Ireland from its modest devolved budget, with a top-up from the Irish-Language Broadcasting Fund. Sadly, the future of the fund has not been secured, with the result that it has become a political football, a situation that is bad for both language planning and community relations, since objections to Irish on symbolic grounds will continue until its use is normalised.

Clearly, if TG4 were made available on Freeview, or its Irish-language programming were made available for re-broadcast by a dedicated Northern Irish-language station, a secured Broadcasting Fund could make a valuable contribution. Taking full advantage of the investment in Irish-language broadcasting by the Irish Government, it would be possible to have a quantitatively and qualitatively better station than BBC Alba for a smaller UK outlay. Instead there is the wasteful situation that Northern services are inadequate while Southern services are substantially unavailable in the North.

A long-term commitment to the Broadcasting Fund based on a best-practice *per capita* equivalence with spending on Scottish Gaelic, the best comparator, could go a long way towards securing the future of the language in Northern Ireland, removing its promotion from the political arena, improving community relations and honouring the UK Government's international treaty commitments. An essential element of public-service broadcasting has for too long been blocked for extra-linguistic reasons or ignored entirely.

OFCOM's failure to make an explicit statement in favour of Irish-language broadcasting will allow decision-makers to hide behind generalised statements on provision for the UK's other indigenous minoritised languages, with the result that, in Northern Ireland, Anglophone monoculture will be promoted in the guise of diversity. The Irish-language community desperately needs OFCOM to make its voice heard in order to achieve equity *vis-à-vis* the UK's other languages.

The BBC has agreed to a step-by-step augmentation of Irish-language provision, but it will be unable to fulfil its promise unless long-term funding is secured for the Irish-Language Broadcasting Fund. It cannot be stressed enough that, while the levels of funding necessary are in fiscal terms tiny and could be improved at nugatory cost to UK taxpayers, putting the fund on a statutory footing or otherwise guaranteeing its existence — at no cost at all — could make an equally valuable contribution. It is in no one's interest for young Irish-speakers trained in television production to turn their backs on the industry because of funding gaps or funding uncertainty.

If OFCOM feels that the Broadcasting Fund is not the best way to proceed, it should provide clear proposals for an alternative such as the UK Government taking a capital stake in TG4 with its contribution pegged to a percentage of Irish funding (similar reciprocal arrangements already exist for the cross-border Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge). I might also add that Scottish Gaelic has had a dedicated station in the form of Radio nan Gàidheal for a generation, while there is still no professional, publicly funded Irish-language radio station in Northern Ireland. Above all, there is a failure of equity in Irish-language provision, and until OFCOM addresses that failure explicitly, it will be failing in its public duty.