

# “QUITE AN INNOCUOUS THING”:

## The Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic and language revitalisation in the Isle of Man

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the past several decades, Manx Gaelic, the indigenous language of the Isle of Man, a small island in the British Isles, has undergone a profound process of revitalisation and reintegration into the life of the community. At the forefront of this revitalisation process has been a dedicated group of language activists who saved the language following the death of the last native speakers. More recently, however, the Isle of Man government has supported the revitalisation of Manx, mainly through education planning and support for cultural programming. This article examines the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic, a committee of the island’s parliament, Tynwald, the internal and external contexts that shaped its deliberations and recommendations and the role it played in signalling a change in the attitude of the government towards Manx in the mid-1980s. The Select Committee highlights the important connection between the political (governance) and social (identity) dimensions of islandness in the revitalisation of an Indigenous language in a small island context.

**KEYWORDS:** Manx, language revitalisation, governance, islandness

### Introduction

Since the death of its last native speaker in 1974, Manx Gaelic (Manx), the indigenous language of the Isle of Man, a small island in the British Isles, has undergone a profound process of revitalisation and reintegration into the life of the community. After over a century of steady decline, the language is now much more visible throughout the island in both the public and private spheres. Most importantly, in terms of the future health and development of the language, Manx has been incorporated into the education system through immersion programming at the *Bunscoill Ghaelgagh*, the Manx-language primary school, and second language instruction at English language schools (Wilson, 2009).

This article explores the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic (Select Committee), a committee of Tynwald, the island’s parliament, that was active in the mid-1980s, and the role that it played in revitalising Manx. The work of the Select Committee and its impact on the language was possible in large part due to the political autonomy exercised by this small island jurisdiction. While it is not completely sovereign, the Isle of

Man is a Dependency of the British Crown, a status that affords the island's government control over internal matters. The committee and its report also underscored the importance of the Isle of Man's distinct language and culture to local politicians at a time when negative attitudes towards Manx were still commonplace on the island. These politicians used their political influence and acumen to craft a series of recommendations that would provide a foundation for language revitalisation in the decades that followed.

In many respects, the Select Committee was a product of a series of broader political, economic and social changes, both internal and external to the Isle of Man, that profoundly affected this small island jurisdiction in the post-war period. It represented a pivotal moment for Manx because it provided a political and legislative foundation for the revitalisation of the language in the decades that followed. Although the report and recommendations produced by the Select Committee were not radical by any stretch of the imagination, they signalled a change in the attitude of the government towards Manx and the beginning of a partnership between government and civil society actors that breathed new life into the language and the island's culture and identity after centuries of decline and neglect.

The article begins with a brief overview of the Isle of Man and a discussion of the various dimensions of islandness that have been used by Island Studies scholars as an analytical framework for examining small island jurisdictions. Part two examines the history of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic, including the parliamentary debates that led to its establishment, and its report, which contained a series of recommendations regarding the place and use of Manx on the island. The submissions to the Select Committee from a variety of government departments and bodies, non-governmental organisations, private businesses and individual citizens provide a representative snapshot of the mood in government and on the island more generally towards the language at this time. Part three provides an overview of the internal and external contexts that influenced the revitalisation of Manx. The concluding section offers some thoughts on the legacy of the Select Committee and a summary of the article's main findings.

### The Isle of Man in a Small Island Context

The Isle of Man, which has a population of about 85,000 and is approximately 572 square kilometres in size, is located in Irish Sea, roughly equidistant from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. It is part of the geographical region known as the British Isles but is not part of the United Kingdom. The island is a Dependency of the British Crown, a status that allows its parliament to legislate on internal matters. It does, however, rely on the United Kingdom for foreign relations and military protection. The language of communication and administration in the Isle of Man is English and, given its geographical position, the island has strong political, economic and social connections to the United Kingdom. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Manx, which is a part of the Goidelic language group (along with Irish and Scottish Gaelic), was spoken as a vernacular language by the majority of the population. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the number of Manx speakers declined considerably as a result of various political and socio-economic factors including assimilation (Anglicisation), emigration and immigration, and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there were only a handful of elderly, native speakers left (Gawne, 2002; Broderick, 1999). Around this time, however, Manx was saved from extinction by a dedicated group of language activists. Their efforts were later supported by the island's government, a significant policy shift that would have profound implications for the language and the island.



Figure 1 - The Isle of Man in the British Isles (Adapted from: [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5543](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5543)).

The Isle of Man embodies many of the characteristics prevalent in other small island jurisdictions. As Baldacchino (2010: 19) has noted in his work on island governance, politically and institutionally, it occupies the “fuzzy middle ground between full sovereignty and conventional municipality.” The Isle of Man is not a sovereign state. Indeed, throughout its history, the island has been a dominion of other, more powerful neighbours (Kinvig, 1975). Over the course of the post-war period, however, it has undergone a series of political and institutional reforms that have strengthened its autonomy and democracy. These changes are consistent with political and historical developments identified in other small island jurisdictions and reflect some of the general dimensions of islandness identified in the literature on Island Studies. As summarised by Hepburn (2012: 127), these include:

- geographical (separation from the mainland);
- political (expressed through a desire to be self-governing);
- social (a sense of islander identity);
- demographic (high rates of emigration);
- historical (as sites of conquest, assimilation and colonialism); and
- economic (limited resources and economies of scale, and high transportation costs).

While all of these dimensions of islandness are relevant to the story of the Isle of Man and its indigenous language, this article focuses in particular on the relationship between the political (governance) and social (identity) dimensions and the way in which this relationship has evolved in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to produce significant changes in the perceptions and place of the language on the island. The important connection between the political and social dimensions of islandness has been noted by other island scholars. Hache (1998), for example, observed that the concept of insularity can be used to promote a distinct identity that reinforces the economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of islandness (as cited in Hepburn, 2012: 126). In other words, the relationship between identity and politics is symbiotic and mutually dependent: a strong sense of island identity supports ideas of island autonomy and distinctiveness and political autonomy, in turn, provides the legislative tools and resources to promote various aspects of island identity, including the promotion and revitalisation of language and culture.

Language revitalisation has been studied in many other contexts and jurisdictions around the world. Throughout the British Isles, and in particular in the countries and regions of the Celtic periphery, there are many examples of active minority and indigenous language revitalisation programs that are supported by both grassroots language activists and organisations and governments with varying degrees of autonomy. These include: Jèrriais and Guernésiais in the Channel Islands (Sallabank, 2013; Johnson, 2011); Welsh (Williams, 2014); Scottish Gaelic and Irish (Walsh and McLeod, 2008); Cornish (Thompson, 2015) and Manx (McArdle and Teare, 2016; Sallabank, 2013; Wilson, 2009; Gawne, 2002). Island Studies scholars have also focused on language revitalisation as a critical element in the preservation and promotion of small island cultures and societies (Ishihara, 2016; Long, 2007; Heinrich, 2005; Mühlhäusler, 2002).

In addition to contributing to the literatures on language revitalisation in the British Isles and small island jurisdictions in other parts of the world, this article adopts a methodological approach used by Island Studies scholars that emphasises an external perspective “of a detached analyst seeking objectively verifiable patterns” and an internal perspective, focused on the attitudes and orientations of islanders that “seeks to understand how ‘distinctive’ island identities develop, how they are experienced, and what effects they have on habits of thought and action, on socio-economic structures and political processes, and the way that these engage with externally determined facts of geography and history” (Warrington and Milne, 2007: 381-382). As scholars, we are interested in analysing the Select Committee and the broader changes that influenced its work for the purpose of explaining the shifting fortunes of Manx within an evolving internal and external context. To accomplish this goal, however, we incorporate the views and perspectives of islanders about a range of issues relating to politics, identity and the language. By drawing on a comprehensive local media search for the seven-year period prior to and during the tabling of the Select Committee’s report (1979-1985), interviews with key individuals who were members of the Select Committee or actively involved in the language community at the time, publicly available government documents and reports, and the scholarly literature on the modern history of the Isle of Man, this research builds on the work of others (Gawne 2002; Sallabank, 2013) to present a more complete picture of the Select Committee’s activities and the context in which it was situated.

## The Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic

The Select Committee resulted from a motion that was tabled in Tynwald on December 12, 1984, by Charles Cain, a Member of the House of Keys (MHK), the parliament's lower elected chamber. In addition to being a Manx speaker and cultural champion, Cain had been involved in the island's finance sector prior to becoming an MHK (Rawcliffe, 2009: 77). Despite the reservations of some members of Tynwald, his promotion and support of the motion carried a great deal of weight in the parliament and in broader political circles at the time.

The motion contained four separate parts:

1. That Manx Gaelic should be supported and encouraged by all agencies of Government and Boards of Tynwald so far as they are practically able
2. That all official oaths and declarations should be able to be made in Manx Gaelic or English at the option of the person making any such oath or declaration
3. That all documents expressed in Manx Gaelic shall have equal official and legal standing as documents expressed in English
4. That where places, roads, or streets are bilingually named in English and Manx Gaelic, the use of the Manx name should have the same official and legal standing as the use of the English name (Tynwald Court, 1984: T717-8).

In his remarks in support of the motion, Cain spoke eloquently and passionately about the history of Manx and its connections to other Gaelic languages. He also underscored the precariousness of its present circumstances, noting in particular, the responsibility that the island's government had in its demise: "Our ancient and unique language survives, not with the support of Government but in spite of a historical hostility in Government which is over a century old" (Tynwald Court, 1984: T718).

The tabling of Cain's motion followed directly after a successful resolution on the designation of 1986 as the Manx Cultural Heritage Year. As one interviewee who was active in the language community at the time noted, this was no coincidence. 1986 was an important year because it marked the centenary of the establishment of the Manx Museum and National Trust (now Manx National Heritage). In his remarks, the Speaker of the House of Keys, Sir Charles Kerruish said:

*For all too long Manx heritage has been the Cinderella of Manx life. For a people proud of their ancient and distinguished history, who use that history to promote the Island to visitors, this Government and recent Governments have shown an astonishing disregard for the need to both preserve and promote that heritage. (Tynwald Court, 1984, T716).*

He also remarked that the island's cultural heritage included its language, and that support for the island's heritage had increased, referencing the establishment of the Manx Heritage Foundation (now Culture Vannin), which received significant government support, two years previously. In his motion to Tynwald, Charles Cain built upon the sentiments

expressed by Kerruish by asking, “how this court regards its cultural heritage as embodied in the Manx language. Is it worth fostering or not? Is the Manx language something important to our cultural heritage or not?” Having agreed with Kerruish’s earlier motion, it would have been very difficult for the members of Tynwald to have completely opposed the motion proposed by Cain.

While much of the discussion centered on the best way to further consider the implications of adopting Cain’s motion, there was one voice of dissent. Referring to Cain’s statement that “respect for and the survival of the Manx Gaelic tongue is an essential element for our natural cultural survival” (Tynwald Court, 1984: T718), Eddie Lowey, a member of Tynwald’s appointed upper chamber, the Legislative Council, countered: “I do not believe that there is any pressure from within the Island for this and I am not going to be branded less of a patriot to the Isle of Man as a Manxman because I do not happen to speak Manx Gaelic or, even more important, understand it” (Tynwald Court, 1984: T721). He also raised the issue of the financial costs of the official recognition and promotion of Manx, implying that the added costs could not be justified at a time when the island was in the middle of a prolonged period of economic stagnation. After the debate finished, the members decided to refer the matter to a select committee comprised of five members<sup>1</sup> and the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic was formally established. This was an important step because creating a select committee would give the matter greater profile and political legitimacy, whatever the outcome of the committee’s report and recommendations.

The committee met three times over the course of the next six months. After the first meeting, on January 25, 1985, it invited all boards and departments of government to comment on the motion. It also solicited written evidence from interested parties outside government. At the March 25, 1985 meeting, the committee members reviewed submissions from government, as well as those from private individuals and organisations. The report was compiled based on these submissions and the deliberations of the committee and considered at the final meeting on June 17, 1985.

The responses from government and interested parties to the motion were diverse and numerous. There is not enough room here to analyse them in detail, but it is possible to offer some general comments on their content and tone. Most government boards and agencies were, understandably, cautious, pointing out the administrative, practical and financial implications of recognising Manx as a language of government. Some simply noted that the motion had no practical application to their business and daily activities, the underlying assumption being that this was a frivolous exercise that was not important. Others were more detailed in their responses, discussing specific administrative activities that would be made more difficult or costly as a result of recognising Manx. Overall, there seemed to be support for including Manx in various ceremonial or symbolic activities, such as the reading of certain oaths or in creating bilingual signage on government buildings, but the general consensus was that Manx should not play a role in the practical day to day administration of government.

As for the reaction of non-governmental organisations and private citizens, it is important to note that the majority of these were connected to the Manx language community. Most

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<sup>1</sup> The members of the Select Committee were: Mr. Don Maddrell, MHK; Mrs. Clare Christian, MHK, Mr. Charles Cain, MHK; Dr. David Moore, MHK; and Mr. Eddie Lowey, MLC.

of these groups and individuals were supportive of the motion and happy that the issue had been raised in Tynwald. Those in support echoed many of the sentiments of nation and identity expressed by Charles Cain when he brought forth the motion in Tynwald. The Manx Museum and National Trust noted that an “indigenous language acts as a badge of cultural identity” which “elevates the importance of Manx above its current minority status”. Those in opposition mentioned practical and financial implications, as well as the issue around the connection between identity and language that was raised by Eddie Lowey.

The Report of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic was presented to Tynwald on July 10, 1985. Surprisingly, there was no debate on the report; Charles Cain moved the report, the Governor<sup>2</sup> asked, “Is it agreed” and Tynwald agreed. The report addressed each part of the motion. To begin, it recognised the efforts and dedication of the language community past and present in saving the language from extinction. It expressed “a general desire to see the indigenous language preserved and promoted as a mark of national identity and used wherever possible and practicable” (2.3). The notion of practicability resonates throughout the document. For example, on the question of the use of Manx in government, the report recommended that the language be encouraged, but not at “the expense of efficient and cost-effective administration” (3.7).

As for using the language in official oaths and declarations, the report recognised the legal issues associated with giving Manx the same legal status as English in the administration of justice and the practical difficulties of accommodating Manx in oaths and declarations. It did, however, suggest that some ceremonial oaths could be issued and accepted in Manx as long as a correct translation could be made available. To that end, it recommended the establishment of a Manx Language Advisory Commission to advise the government on matters relating to language. Interestingly, such a commission would be voluntary, presumably so as not to put undue pressure on the public purse.<sup>3</sup>

In the section on the equality of Manx with English in legal and commercial documents, the report adopted a blunter tone, stating that the recognition of Manx “would have an immediate and detrimental effect on the Island’s commercial activity to the ultimate disadvantage of all sectors of the community” (5.2). While there was some support for bilingual signs at ports of entry and Manx on banknotes, postage stamps, cheques and company documentation and in official documents such as passports, the report recommended “a gradual and progressive introduction of Manx Gaelic into [these] areas...but always subject to the proviso that nothing should present an impediment to the expeditious transaction of commercial activity which is so essential to the Island’s economic wellbeing” (5.5).

The report’s clearest support for the language came in the last section on the use of Manx in place names, streets and roads. It recommended that, “bilingual name signs be used where the name is English, or where a heavily anglicised Manx name is in general use.” It further recommended that where “the accepted name is already Manx or Norse, no English translation is either necessary or desirable” (6.1). The report was critical of some local authorities and the Post Office for not being more accommodating when it came to the use of Manx. For example, it singled out the Post Office’s reluctance to deliver letters

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<sup>2</sup> The Governor (or Lieutenant-Governor) is the British monarch’s representative in the Isle of Man.

<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, there was no discussion or mention of asking *Yn Çheshaght Ghailckagh*, the Manx Language Society, to play this particular role.

addressed in Manx, stating that “the committee do [sic] not see why any real [underlined in the original] difficulty should be experienced in the Isle of Man and hope that the Authority will adopt a more sympathetic approach in future.” It is clear from the report that the Committee members were aware of the situation in Ireland and the Channel Islands, where bilingual signage was the norm (6.3).

In general, the report was viewed as very balanced, sober and unobtrusive. The concluding section reiterated the recommendations that had been proposed in the body of the report and, once again, repeated the caveat that the introduction of Manx “must always be subject to the overriding provisos that nothing must hinder the commercial development of the Island, and that its use must be practicable and feasible” (7.1). As mentioned above, there was no recorded debate or discussion about the report in Tynwald. However, an editorial in the *Isle of Man Times* the following week congratulated the committee on “keeping its collective head” and coming out “firmly against going over the top on the use of Manx.” It concluded that “[w]isely the committee said Tynwald should encourage what is already happening, which is the natural and optional method of keeping the language alive... In this way Manx will survive and thrive and it will do so with the dignity it deserves” (Editorial, 1985: 8). A week later, Adrian Cain, the future *Yn Greinneyder* or Manx Language Development Officer, criticised the editorial stating “your attitude involves an implicit distaste towards the Manx language, heritage and culture” (Cain, 1985: 4). In response to the concerns about the financial implications of the move to give greater recognition to Manx, Cain pointed out the importance of identity and language in establishing the “Island’s role in the international community and in overcoming the increasing alienation of many Manx people (addressing modern day social ills), providing a stimulus to the Manx economy and unifying the Manx people” (Cain, 1985: 4).

Our interviews with some of the members of the committee and other people who were active in politics and/or the language community at the time revealed some interesting insights into the report and its impacts in the longer term. Several interviewees viewed the report as more of an aspirational document, a call to action that was accepted because there were no specific costs or targets associated with it. Some noted that the committee members who had given the most support to the original motion were well-respected in Tynwald and throughout the island. Indeed, Charles Cain was on the Tynwald Finance Committee so it was expected that he would be fiscally prudent. Another interviewee mentioned that the timing of the motion was important. It occurred at a time of transition in the island’s government, before the advent of the ministerial system, when individual MHKs were able to bring motions to the floor of Tynwald. In his opinion, if Cain had not brought the motion to the floor when he did, government support for Manx would have been delayed or may never have happened. This institutional practice speaks to the unique nature of the Isle of Man’s political system, a characteristic that is common in other small island jurisdictions.

The tabling of the motion that established the Select Committee was a direct result of the initiative of individual politicians such as Charles Cain and would not have occurred if Tynwald did not have the legislative autonomy to approve it. It is important to recognise, however, that in the decades leading up to the Select Committee, the Isle of Man experienced some profound political, economic and social changes that would transform the island in a number of important ways. As the next sections will outline, these changes, coupled with broader developments taking place outside the island, set the stage for the Select Committee and the revitalisation of Manx in the decades that followed.



## Internal and External Contexts

Over the last century, the Isle of Man has undergone a considerable amount of change that has had both positive and negative effects on the island and its language and culture. These changes can be summarised into three categories: political, economic and socio-demographic. Politically, the island has strengthened its autonomy through the gradual empowerment of the elected House of Keys relative to the unelected Legislative Council, the chamber that was traditionally a means through which the Crown (read British Government) controlled the island's political fate (Kermode, 2001; Belchem, 2000). While the British Parliament's *Isle of Man Act, 1958*, provided for an initial devolution of power to Tynwald, the following two decades would witness "a lengthy but ultimately successful constitutional campaign by MHKs for a transfer of power within the Island, from the Lieutenant-Governor [the representative of the British Crown] to Tynwald and within Tynwald to the elected chamber" (Kermode, 2001: 181). This transfer of power not only democratised the island's political system, but it would eventually also provide the means through which local politicians could promote and support Manx language and culture.

In addition to these significant political changes, the economy of the Isle of Man also underwent a considerable transformation in the post-war period. The decline of traditional activities such as farming and fishing, coupled with a steady decrease in the number of tourists visiting the island meant that a new economic model had to be created. From the 1960s, the government laid the foundation for a new economy through two initiatives: the New Residents' Policy, which encouraged the immigration of permanent residents, mostly from the UK and its former and existing colonies; and the establishment of the island's financial services sector, which would not only attract new businesses, but also new residents. As will be explained below, the new economic model would have both positive and negative effects on the island's language and culture. In the period immediately prior to the Select Committee and the deliberations in Tynwald, the Isle of Man experienced an economic downturn, caused in part by the lack of regulation in the emerging finance sector (Rawcliffe, 2009). While Tynwald would later introduce measures to regulate the finance sector, the fiscal prudence of the MHKs who debated the Select Committee motion, as well as some of the organisations that submitted opinions to the Select Committee, was clear and could be directly attributed to their concerns about the island's financial situation at that time.

The political and economic changes affecting the Isle of Man had important socio-demographic implications that would shape the debate around Cain's motion and the work of the Select Committee. As noted above, the policies pursued by the Government in the 1960s led to a rise in immigration that substantially increased the number of "come-overs", the local, somewhat pejorative term for newcomers to the island. Although these changes increased the population and stimulated the local economy (Belchem, 2000: 267), it also caused a shift in the "ethnic balance" on the island, a change that led to the emergence of a number of organisations aimed at opposing government policy and supporting Manx culture and identity.<sup>4</sup> *Mec Vannin* (Sons of Mann) was established in the early 1960s as a pro-independence campaign group, and quickly developed into a political party. There was a strong cultural element to their objectives, which included embracing all elements of Manx cultural identity (Bridson 1983: 301). The early 1970s saw the establishment of more a

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<sup>4</sup> By 1991, the number of people living in the Isle of Man who were born off the island would surpass the number born on the Island (Belchem, 2000: 432).

militant protest group, *Fo Halloo* ('Underground'), followed by *Irree Magh* ('Rebellion' or 'Insurrection') in the mid-1970s. Broadly speaking, these organisations focused their criticisms on two issues in particular. First, in their view, the increase in immigration led to a rise in the cost of living and especially house prices, which had a negative impact on ordinary Manx people. The demand for new housing also led to an increase in speculative purchasing, with much of the criticism aimed at politicians and financiers. Second, the demographic changes caused by an influx of new immigrants, many of whom had no connection to the island, represented a threat to the island's linguistic and cultural heritage (Rawcliffe 2009).

During the 1970s, there was a general increase in support for, and interest in, Manx language and culture. *Yn Çheshaght Ghailckagh* (the Manx Language Society), originally founded in 1899, was re-energised through the work of a number of young language activists. A weekly news bulletin was developed for Manx Radio, a Manx language column appeared in the *Manx Star*, and Manx language sessions were arranged in some of the island's pubs. The first attempt at teaching Manx in the island's schools began after the appointment of a native Welsh-speaker, Alun Davies, as Director of Education in 1974 (Broderick, 1999: 179-81).<sup>5</sup>

Alongside this, Manx music and dance events were also gaining pace. The 1970s saw the revival of *Yn Chruinnaght* ('The Gathering') – a pan-Celtic festival that had its origins in the inter-war period. This followed the creation of two other pan-Celtic festivals in 1971: one in Killarney in Ireland, and one in Lorient in Brittany. These events helped bring together enthusiasts from different Celtic nations, providing an opportunity for cultural and intellectual exchange. There was also considerable overlap between the cultural revival and the more overtly political protest movements, with many political nationalists also engaging in cultural activities. Woolley (2003: 118) notes that "[t]he three branches of Manx cultural activity; language, music and dance, were inevitably linked by politics, and enthusiasts for the nationalist cause either actively supported or were involved in at least one of the disciplines." All of these activities formed an important backdrop to the discussions taking place in government about supporting the revitalisation of Manx.

The preceding overview has outlined the general context that existed on the Isle of Man prior to and during the deliberations of the Select Committee. In the lead up to the Select Committee, however, there were a number of specific events and initiatives associated with linguistic and cultural revitalisation that supported the ideals expressed in the motion to Tynwald. In 1979, the Isle of Man celebrated the millennium of Tynwald. Although Tynwald was originally a Norse (as opposed to a Celtic) institution, it has become a symbol of the island's autonomy and history. The millennium celebrations generated considerable interest in the Isle of Man's history and culture, both on the island and throughout the Manx diaspora, and saw visitor numbers increase by nearly twenty per cent from the previous year (Prentice, 1990: 253).

In July 1980, at the annual meeting of Tynwald held in St. John's<sup>6</sup>, Sheila Tarr, who had moved to the island from England, presented a petition of redress for the establishment of

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<sup>5</sup> For further information on language developments during this period, see Stowell (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Tynwald is a working legislature, but every year on Tynwald Day (July 5<sup>th</sup>), it meets at an open-air ceremony at Tynwald Hill in St. John's. Here, all the laws passed by Tynwald during the previous year are read out in English and Manx, and regular citizens are allowed to raise issues with the assembled parliamentarians and other dignitaries through petitions of redress.

a Manx Cultural Centre and for the appointment of a Select Committee to investigate (Tynwald Court, 1980a: T1288). The motion was moved in Tynwald in December that year by Clare Christian, MHK, who noted that “there is a growing, and I believe justifiable, concern in many quarters that the strength of our Manx identity has been sapped to a very considerable extent over the past century and that steps must now be taken to reinforce and sustain that identity before it is completely submerged” (Tynwald Court, 1980b: T415). Christian also observed that there were already signs of a cultural revival, with “many groups of individuals who are interested in furthering the different forms of Manx culture” (Tynwald Court, 1980b: T416). A Select Committee was established in December 1980 and produced a report that was debated extensively in both chambers of Tynwald over the next two years. While the limits of space prevent a full synopsis and analysis of the extensive discussions that took place, the result was the passing of the Manx Heritage Foundation Act in 1982 and the promulgation of this act at the annual meeting of Tynwald in July 1983, three years to the day that Sheila Tarr presented her petition for redress. The Act created the Manx Heritage Foundation (MHF) and Foundation Fund, an organisation that has since played a critical role in preserving, promoting and revitalising Manx language and culture.<sup>7</sup>

A series of articles in the island press in April 1982 revealed a significant undercurrent of concern about the future of the language. Prior to the November 1981 General Election, *Banglane Twaie ny Sheshaght Ghailckagh*, the northern branch of *Yn Çheshaght Ghailckagh*, had conducted a survey of all prospective candidates for the House of Keys to ascertain the level of their support for language development. Of the 62% of candidates who responded, 56% advocated no official support for the language, leading the Society to conclude that, “whilst the language is not subject to overt suppression it remains the victim of ignorance and indifference emanating from the highest level in the community” (Ramsay, 1982). This article was accompanied by another full-page analysis in the *Isle of Man Examiner* (Editorial, 1982a: 17) and an editorial in the *Isle of Man Weekly Times* (Editorial, 1982b: 6).

Despite the lack of support among election candidates, the early 1980s saw a number of positive developments for the language. In 1982, twelve adult students began their studies for the first Ordinary Level examinations in Manx (Stowell, 2005: 404) and, in 1983, the first Manx-language film was produced (*Ny Kirree fo Niaghtey* – “The sheep under the snow”<sup>8</sup>) and a conference on ‘Manx Gaelic Today’ was held (Broderick, 1999: 179). In July of that same year, Manx National Heritage held the first of what would become an annual open day at Cregneash, a hub for Manx culture, which included demonstrations of traditional crafts and Manx language (Mackie, 2013: 27). A survey by the Manx Heritage Foundation in 1983 found that bilingual road signs were already in use in certain parts of the island, having been erected with financial support from *Yn Çheshaght Ghailckagh*. Manx signage could also be seen on the government offices in Douglas and the Town Hall and Court House in Ramsey (Berresford Ellis, 1985: 163). Clearly, events in the 1970s and early 1980s indicated a renewed interest in (and concern for) the linguistic and cultural heritage of the island at the level of civil society that would later filter into and influence the debates taking place in Tynwald around government support for Manx. These events, combined with the political, economic and socio-demographic changes that had taken place on the

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<sup>7</sup> In 2014, the Manx Heritage Foundation adopted the trading name Culture Vannin and later established its headquarters in St. John’s, across the road from Tynwald Hill where the annual Tynwald Day is held.

<sup>8</sup> A 23 minute long documentary about the eponymous Manx folksong directed by George Broderick.

island over the previous two decades, had a profound effect on both the tenor of the debate and the decision to create the Select Committee.

In addition to changes occurring on the island, there were a number of external developments that indirectly influenced the work of the Select Committee and the gradual rise in interest in the Manx language and culture. One example of international influence and activism came in 1981 when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) convened a meeting of experts on Celtic cultures and other interested parties to promote Celtic studies and discuss projects that might be funded by UNESCO (UNESCO, 1982). Brian Stowell, a prominent language activist who would later become the Department of Education's first Manx Language Officer, represented the Isle of Man at the conference.

In Europe at the time, there were several initiatives that supported minority language rights. In 1981, the Council of Europe, an organisation that was founded in 1949 to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe, adopted Recommendation 928 on the "Educational and Cultural Problems of Minority Languages and Dialects in Europe". This recommendation spoke to a number of the issues raised in Cain's original motion and the Select Committee Report, such as the gradual adoption of names in the original language of territories, respect and official support for the use of standardised minority languages in education and the media, and official status for minority languages (Council of Europe, 2014). It was seen as a preliminary step towards the adoption of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1992. In 2003, the UK Government ratified the Charter on behalf of Manx Gaelic in the Isle of Man, thus obligating the Isle of Man Government to meet a number of requirements relating to the development of, and support for, Manx (see McArdle and Teare, 2016: 9-12).

Another European institution that was active in the promotion and protection of minority languages at this time was the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the European Union (EU). The Isle of Man was not a member of the EEC but was connected to it through the United Kingdom's (UK) membership and, specifically, through a protocol arrangement that had been negotiated when the UK joined the EEC in 1973 (Wilson, 2005). Through the protocol arrangement, the island had access to what would become the European Single Market and was influenced indirectly through UK legislation that complied with European laws and regulations.

In the early 1980s, the European Parliament adopted several resolutions on regional and minority languages that culminated in the first meeting of the European Parliament Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages in 1983 (Gál, Hicks and Eplényi, 2011). The main purpose of this body was:

*to bring together those members of parliament who had shown an interest in promoting minority languages and cultures with a view to working together in Parliament to promote and monitor community policies in favour of minority languages and cultures. (Gál, Hicks and Eplényi, 2011: 10)*

In later decades, the work of the Intergroup would result in programs designed to provide funding to support minority languages. The fact that the Isle of Man was not a full member of the EU prevented it from accessing such funding; however, the activities of the Intergroup, even in the early stages, created greater awareness about the situation facing

minority languages in Europe, and this was used by Manx language activists to encourage Tynwald to support the language (Jerry, 1985).

Several nations had longstanding policies and programs to support Celtic languages, the most prominent of which were Ireland and Wales and, to a lesser extent, Scotland. In fact, the Irish government had a history of direct support for the preservation of Manx, going back to the efforts of the Irish Folklore Commission to record the last native speakers of the language in the 1940s (Gawne, 2000). Manx language activists were aware of the language policies and programs of other Celtic nations through their involvement in organisations such as the Celtic League and the Celtic Congress, and *Yn Chruinnaght*, as well as gatherings and festivals in other Celtic countries and regions.

Although these external developments did not have a direct impact on events transpiring at the time in the Isle of Man, they provided an important backdrop to the discussions taking place in Tynwald and throughout the island about the future of Manx. Collectively, they reveal a gradual but perceptible increase in awareness of the state of minority languages and cultures and the continuing threats posed by assimilation. Together with the important developments happening on the island, including the motion and the creation of the Select Committee, they marked a turning point in the revitalisation of the Manx language and culture.

### The Legacy of the Select Committee

The work of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic represented an important shift in the government's attitude towards Manx. Until this point, the government had been at best agnostic and at worst hostile to the language. Since 1985, Manx has made considerable progress, due in large part to the continued support and efforts of the language community, but also to the engagement of various government departments, in particular the Department of Education. To what extent, however, did the Report of the Select Committee precipitate this progress?

On a very general level, the Select Committee added an air of legitimacy and importance to the language and its place within Manx society. The committee's first recommendation was that "Tynwald declares its intent that the preservation and promotion of the Manx Gaelic should be an objective of the Isle of Man Government" (7.3, a). As one interviewee observed, this gave the language a status that it did not have before. While the report was lacking in terms of concrete proposals and policies, it demonstrated that the government was supportive of Manx, at least in a symbolic sense, and that the language was important enough for the government to discuss. Furthermore, the Select Committee report created a foundation for a series of programs and initiatives that would roll out in the ensuing decades in a number of different areas, such as education, heritage and cultural development.

The report was much less supportive of the idea of the legal recognition of Manx, mainly because of the cost implications for commercial enterprises and government departments. While some businesses and departments have used the language in advertising and marketing, English remains the sole language of law and commerce. As noted above, in 2003, the UK Government ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages for Manx in the Isle of Man, awarding Part II status to the language and

affording it a level of official protection through its obligation to meet requirements relating to the development of, and support for, the language (see McArdle and Teare, 2016: 9-12).<sup>9</sup> In reality, the responsibility for this fell to the Isle of Man Government.

As a result of the changes taking place in other areas such as education, and culture and heritage, Manx has gained considerable community exposure, ranging from enhanced signage to radio coverage in Manx. The impact of this should not be underestimated. The intervening years have seen a significant shift in public perceptions of the language and its place on the island (Stowell, 2005: 415). Colin Jerry noted in his evidence to the Select Committee that the “[o]fficial presence of Manx Gaelic could be the most significant single factor in creating a climate of real interest in the language ... It would restore pride in the language and pride in the nation” (Jerry, 1985). Although Manx is only a community language in a very narrow sense of the term, there has been an increase in the number of speakers and in the number of people who are interested in learning the language. Census results confirm a rise in those who could speak, read, or write Manx from 0.52% of the population in 1971 (284 individuals) to 1.06% of the population in 1991 (741 individuals). In 2011, this figure had increased to 2.16% (1,823 individuals). It is highly unlikely that Manx will ever regain its status as a widespread community language or rival or replace English as a language of communication on the island. It is, however, set on a positive trajectory of growth for the first time in many centuries.

## Conclusion

The Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic represented a significant moment in the revitalisation of Manx. After centuries of decline and neglect, the island’s parliament proclaimed publicly and clearly that Manx was an important part of the island’s cultural heritage and worthy of government support. Although the Select Committee’s report was measured in its recommendations, hence the remark by one of our interviewees that it was “quite an innocuous thing”, it indicated to the language community and islanders as a whole that the government was prepared to support ongoing efforts to revitalise the language. In doing so, it paved the way for a partnership between government and civil society actors, grassroots language activists who had struggled for decades to bring the language back from the brink of extinction. This partnership would provide the foundation for the revitalisation of the language in the decades that followed.

The work of the Select Committee and government support for Manx language programming were facilitated by the fact that the Isle of Man is an internally governing Crown Dependency that, over the course of the post-war period, had strengthened its autonomy and its institutions of democratic governance. As such, Tynwald had the authority to respond directly to growing calls for linguistic and cultural revitalisation on the island. It is important to note, however, that the Select Committee was the result of the work of several prominent political figures, most importantly Charles Cain. Without their support and leadership, the Select Committee and its report may never have seen the light of day.

Cultural revivals in other parts of the Celtic world, coupled with support for minority languages and cultures in Europe as a whole also contributed to a heightened interest in

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<sup>9</sup> In December 2020, Part III status was extended to Manx Gaelic. This places additional responsibilities on the Government to promote the language in a diverse range of settings.

Manx language and culture. Although the Select Committee, and Tynwald in general, were not directly interested in what was happening with regard to minority languages in the UK and mainland Europe, at the grassroots level, pan-Celtic and minority language connections were vital in helping to share experiences and information between language groups. Indeed, the role of grassroots organisations, and of key individuals within them, in the cultural revival of the 1970s and 1980s cannot be overstated. The hard work and dedication of a small group of cultural proponents, coupled with the support of well-respected politicians within Tynwald, were key to raising the profile of the language during this period.

What is particularly surprising is the fact that the Select Committee occurred at a time of considerable economic instability on the island. In this context, the ease with which the Select Committee's report was adopted, speaks partly to the moderate nature of its recommendations. It is telling that the recommendations required no financial commitment from government. Indeed, no individual or body within government was assigned responsibility for supporting or developing the use of Manx Gaelic. The Isle of Man Government continued to rely on key individuals and organisations outside of the legislature to support and promote Manx, and it does to this day. However, the adoption of the report and recommendations established a political and legislative basis for financial support when the economy improved.

This study of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic highlights the important relationship between the political (governance) and social (identity) dimensions of islandness. In the 1980s, after centuries of external domination and neglect that led to the decline and near extinction of Manx, the island's government used its political and legislative authority to support and encourage ongoing efforts to revitalise the language. Not only did this strengthen the partnership between government and civil society actors and organisations that were involved in the revitalisation process, it also underscored the importance of the language to islanders and their sense of identity.

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