

CLUB GNÌOMHACHAS NAN GAIDHEAL

Freagairt gu: Eilean Iarmain

Sleite

An t-Eilean Sgitheanach

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16<sup>th</sup> July 2004

A charaid

On behalf of Club Gnìomhachas nan Gàidheal (The Gaelic Business Club) I have pleasure in sending you a copy of a report and recommendations prepared by a delegation which visited Islay in early May.

We hope the report will be of interest and the Council will seriously consider implementing its recommendations. We believe the costs will not be great and that the impact on the island will be considerable as well as greatly enhancing the reputation of the Council in Scotland and internationally.

Le deagh dhurachdan



Sir Iain Noble, Deputy Chairman

**CLUB GHNIOMHACHAS NAN GAIDHEAL**  
(The Gaelic Business Club)

Proposals and Recommendations  
TO ARGYLL & BUTE COUNCIL

Prepared by a Delegation from  
Club Gníomhachas nan Gaidheal  
(The Gaelic Business Club)

Which visited Eilean Ile

6 - 9 May 2004

### **Introduction**

Club Gníomhachas nan Gaidheal consists of senior executives in the business sector throughout Scotland who are gaelic speakers. Apart from social and networking objectives, the Club is interested in finding ways of encouraging business development in the gaelic areas, and in supporting plans for the survival of the language.

The visit to Islay was the first such expedition, and it is hoped it will be followed by others in future years to different communities in the gaelic areas.

This report and recommendations has been written by members of a delegation from Club Gníomhachas nan Gaidheal and is humbly submitted on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Club to Argyll & Bute District Council, in order to assist the Council in developing at no great cost new initiatives based on the historic heritage of Eilean Ile and the gaelic language. The Club believes the initiatives described could greatly strengthen the economy and the community of the Island have tremendous potential for the reputation of Argyll & Bute Council.

The delegation consisted of eight representatives of the Club namely, Sir Iain Noble (leader), businessman, (of Eilean Iarmain, Isle of Skye). Donald and Ceit MacCormaig, antiquarian booksellers, (Edinburgh & North Uist). Donnie and Peigi Johnson, civil engineering contractors, (North Uist), John MacAskill, Hugh Muirhead & Son Ltd, decorating and painting contractors (Edinburgh & Isle of Lewis) Prof Norman Macdonald, broadcaster (Isle of Skye) Ruairaidh Macdonald, retired lecturer (Edinburgh and Isle of Skye).

### **Purpose**

The delegation set out to inform itself about the economy in Islay,

- To meet local members of the business community.
- To brain storm ideas and suggestions with them.
- To look for opportunities for networking and cross fertilisation.
- To explore the linguistic dimension, and the state of Gaelic in the community.
- To visit historic places connected with the Gaelic background of the island.

The delegation was highly impressed by the hospitality and kindness of all those they met in the island, and by the impression of well maintained and prosperous looking houses, absence of “bungalow blight”, and the historic villages which have retained their traditional architectural integrity.

They noticed the strength of Gaelic among the older generation of islanders, and the regret of many who had lost the language. Some others who more recently had left school appeared to have little interest in the language of their ancestors, which they said was a result of the way it had been taught in some schools. On the other hand it was encouraging to learn of reviving interest at Bowmore School, where we were told on one occasion there were forty five active learners and twenty native speakers now being taught through the medium of Gaelic. In actual fact subsequent research revealed that

‘The numbers of Gaelic students at Islay High School for the current year is enumerated at Learners Total 154, with 26 of these taking Standard Grade this year, and a total of 13 in the Higher Classes. Of Fluent Speakers there are 2, with 1 of these taking Standard Grade this year and the other in S2.’

From: Gaelic Classes in Secondary Schools: Pupil Numbers, 2003-2004, compiled by Gaelic Department, University of Strathclyde, 2004.

This gives some hope as a springboard for future development.

With regard to the business community, it was impressive to visit a number of entrepreneurial ventures, though none of them seemed yet to have been initiated by members of the indigenous community.

The island is particularly fortunate in having seven distilleries, creating a good pool of jobs throughout the island, at some of which considerable amounts of capital have recently been invested in order to upgrade facilities, particularly the visitor centres.

The delegation was particularly impressed by a visit to Ionad Chaluim Chille Ile, (“The Columba Centre”) the new academic centre which appears to have enormous potential both for future employment and the inspirational resuscitation of Gaelic as well. If it follows successfully in the footsteps of its “alma mater” at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye, it could become one of the largest employers in Islay with up to a hundred people on the payroll within a decade of starting its full-time academic courses.

Based on these impressions, the delegation believe Argyll & Bute Council should take pride in what still exists in Islay, should retain and strengthen the built and cultural heritage of the Island including gaelic, and develop policies which could inexpensively strengthen community pride in its Gaelic heritage in such a way as to inspire the community (including the commercial community), reverse the brain drain, encourage local entrepreneurial instincts, put the Island on the international map as an inspiration for visitors from other peripheral communities throughout the world, and thus greatly strengthen the local economy. We believe the cost will not be great and the financial return will be good.

It is a common feature of most places where a language is declining that the economy weakens, and emigration and brain drain became a feature. Where a language revives and strengthens, it often leads to both economic and cultural revival.

It was impossible for the delegation not to be aware of the huge harbour project undertaken at Port Askaig, apparently at a cost of some £7m. Had some of this money been available to spend in other ways, the delegation believed it could have been used to excellent effect in strengthening both the economy and the cultural heritage of the Island.

### **Recommendations**

The Council is invited to implement vigorously the following policies:

Appoint a Gaelic Development Committee with a wide remit to report on the scope for

1. Strengthening the Gaelic heritage of Islay (and in other parts of Argyll where Gaelic is still a living language).
2. Increasing Gaelic signage throughout the Island.
3. Introducing gradually "First Language Status" for Gaelic throughout Islay. Community support will be needed and this will be assisted if there is also financial investment in the project and in the island. The reward will be increasing pride, self respect and confidence, which are the foundations of economic success.

First Language Status means converting education in all schools into Gaelic medium. This would give Argyll & Bute an opportunity to move ahead of current policies in the Western Isles and the Highland Council in this field, providing inspirational leadership to others throughout Scotland.

It is believed this policy would rapidly lead to new academic and teaching posts in many fields including lectures, research software, full time and summer students, printing and publishing, well as the possibility of special EU and educational grants for minority languages and contributions from charitable sources in Scotland and abroad.

This in turn would lead to associated developments such as increasing demand for more housing and therefore tradesmen, and the multiplier affect would create increased demand in many fields including shops, garages, taxis and health staff, together with more ferry and air traffic.

4. Introducing a policy of appointing Gaelic speakers as far as possible to fill council posts in the island in the future when vacancies occur.
5. Encouraging Historic Scotland to do more at Finlaggan, allowing more of this important Gaelic site to be seen by visitors. The Council should lead or support initiatives to identify potential sources of sponsorship and backing for this.

6. Using these initiatives as a lever to encourage more tourists to come to Islay including special purpose visitors.

### **Conclusion**

We believe these policies if adopted and swiftly implemented will act as a blood transfusion for the Islay economy and put the island on the international map. The same policies could also be introduced elsewhere, particularly in for example Tiriodh (Tiree) and Liosmor (Lismore).