

## **Culture Committee - CC 09-02 (p3)**

Date: 1 May 2002

Time: 9.00-12.30

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly for Wales

### **Culture Minister's Visit to the Basque Country**

#### ***Purpose***

1. The Committee requested a written report on my recent visit to the Basque Country.

#### ***Previous Assembly Consideration***

2. I provided an oral report on my visit to the Basque Country as part of my Monthly Report to the Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2002.

#### ***Background***

3. I visited the Basque Country between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April, along with the Chairman of the Welsh Language Board, Rhodri Williams. This fact-finding visit was extremely useful and enabled us to gain valuable insights to the work done to support the Basque language over the past 20 years, and to draw suitable comparisons with Wales where appropriate.

4. During the course of the 3 day visit, we received detailed presentations on Basque Language policy from representatives of the Basque Government and I had discussions with the Basque Minister for Culture. We visited the Municipal Council in the town of Bergara to see language planning at work at a local level and we also visited the headquarters of HABE, the institute for teaching Basque to adults. Finally, the visit included a visit to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

5. In many ways, the Basque Country is an ideal country to draw linguistic comparisons with Wales. The Basque Country has a similar sized population (2.1 million), a similar percentage of the population speak the minority language

(around 22% of the population consider themselves to be fully bilingual) and the minority, indigenous language bears no resemblance to the majority language. Over the past 20 years, the Basques have succeeded in reversing the overall decline in the number of Basque speakers, and they are now working to extend the use of the language to all areas of life.

6. There are important differences. The Basque language has a large number of dialects which means that they have had to spend considerable time and effort in developing a standardised form of Basque. Literacy levels in the Basque language are also relatively low in comparison. Whilst property prices are high throughout the Basque Country and Spain as a whole, the Basques do not have to contend with the issues arising out of inward and outward migration in relation to the core Basque-speaking communities.

7. **Messages** - Some clear messages emerged during the course of the visit. The key message is that doing nothing is not an option for minority languages; indeed, institutional indifference, which is evident in the Basque speaking areas of France, leads to a decline in those able to speak the language, and the everyday use of the language. Secondly, and related to this point, is that institutional support, through political will and appropriate measures, can help revitalize the minority language. The Basques invest a considerable amount of time and effort, at both central and local government level, on developing language plans for increasing the number of Basque speakers and the opportunities to use the language. Their approach invariably emphasises encouragement rather than coercion.

8. **Education** - Education is the main vehicle for language revitalization in the Basque Country. Parents have increasingly opted for the bilingual education model (and to a lesser extent, Basque medium education) and the number of children who learn Basque as a second language has fallen dramatically. Whilst this has occurred at primary and secondary level, the shift towards the bilingual education model has been most dramatic in nursery education. This has led to a dramatic increase in the number of young Basques who are able to speak Basque, and has also meant that the teaching of Basque as a second language has disappeared in some core areas of the Basque language. Whilst the Basque Government is committed to marketing the benefits of bilingualism, it should be emphasised that the changes in the teaching of Basque in schools is due to parental choice rather than any governmental coercion. To enable schools to cater for this increased demand in bilingual education, immersion courses in the Basque language are provided for teachers so as to enable them to teach through both languages. This has resulted in the number of teachers able to teach bilingually rising from 4% to 64% over a period of around 20 years.

9. Whilst the Basques have transformed the provision of bilingual education at

primary and secondary level, they noted that they had neglected areas such as vocational education and higher education. The initial focus of the Basques was on primary and secondary school education, rather than on vocational education, although considerable effort is now being made to supply teaching material in Basque for vocational education courses. The higher education sector also faces a lack of suitable teaching material in Basque, although the choice of courses available through the medium of Basque is gradually increasing. Some courses, such as teacher training and law, can be studied completely in Basque, and students can study the core subjects of other degrees in Basque. Encouragingly, students seize the opportunity to study through Basque if they are given the option, and around 30% of lecturers are able to teach their subjects bilingually.

10. The Education Minister will be visiting the Basque Country in May to gain a detailed insight of the Basques' approach to bilingual education, from nursery schools through to higher education.

11. **Adult Education** – The Basques have invested heavily in this area, and have an impressive number of adult education centres (Euskaltegi), and a central support facility (HABE) which provides teaching material and training for teachers, much of it through the internet. There are over 110 centres for teaching Basque to adults, and around 37,000 Basques currently attend courses at these centres. By far the most popular courses are those which provide 2 hours tuition 5 days a week.

12. The Basques spend in the region of €28m on Basque adult education. The vast majority of this money goes towards subsidising the courses offered by the various adult education centres, the majority of which are privately owned entities. HABE, the central support facility, has only around 60 direct employees, and the language teachers are employed directly by the adult education centres. The focus of the language centres has now moved from providing courses for young adults (this a reflection of the success of the education system) toward providing language tuition for those in employment.

13. **Promoting the Language** – The Basques have placed considerable emphasis on promoting language use, and gradually extending its use to new areas. The Basque Government provides subsidies to ensure that the language is promoted across the broad range of traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, children's comics, community papers, and radio. There are two Basque public television channels, transmitting in Basque and Spanish respectively, and both have their own budgets. There are local television channels as well. There are a variety of government supported initiatives encouraging children to use Basque in their leisure time and read Basque books, whilst other initiatives support the use of the language in conferences and

congresses, and aim to promote positive attitudes towards the language generally. The Basques have also been keen to develop the use of the language in new media and technologies, and provide grants and subsidies to that end, for example, to ensure that there are internet versions of Basque language newspapers.

14. Language surveys conducted every 5 years are a key element in the Basque language planning process. These enable language planners to gain detailed information about the numbers able to speak Basque (and the proportion of active and passive bilinguals) as well as how the language is used in different social settings. They also enable language planners to evaluate and assess the efficacy of their initiatives and approaches to language revitalization.

15. **Community Language Planning** – Our visit to Bergara Municipal Council gave us the opportunity to see the work being done to encourage language use within all aspects of community life. Around 70% of the population of Bergara speak Basque, and Basque is the main language of public administration. The Municipal Council takes an active role in promoting language use, employing 3 officials to work on various language initiatives. These encompass activities such as encouraging language transmission within the family, establishing and assisting playgroups, encouraging shopowners to display Basque and Spanish signage, and supporting the production of a Basque language weekly newspaper. Much of the Council's work focussed on encouraging youngsters to use Basque in their leisure and sports activities, and arranging and providing activities to that end. The aim of the council was to extend its activities to the local businesses, and to encourage and facilitate the use of the language in the workplace.

15. **Language Normalisation** – The Basques have met with varied success in developing the use of the language within their civil service. Civil service posts are given language profiles which determine the level of Basque required for particular posts. Frontline posts, and those of a social nature, such as education and health, generally require a higher standard of Basque. There has been goodwill towards this bureaucratic initiative and the majority of staff in posts with language profiles have reached the level of Basque required for their posts. However, there is some uncertainty as to whether it has helped to transform Basque into a working language within the civil service. As a result, the use of the language is still confined to certain pockets of the administration. There is also the question of what happens to civil servants who fail to attain the level of Basque expected of their post.

16. **Guggenheim Museum** – Finally, the visit to the Basque Country afforded me with the opportunity to pay a brief visit to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. This impressive museum, which opened in 1997, received a significant amount of

public subsidy in the face of considerable local opposition, but the investment has been of enormous cultural, social and economic benefit to Bilbao and the Basque Country as a whole. This has been followed by other ambitious projects such as the revamping of Bilbao Airport, partly so as to provide increased capacity to deal with the growing number of visitors to the Basque Country.