

**MIGRATION, FAMILY AND EDUCATION IN GAELIC POLICY PERSPECTIVE:
a presentation to the Gaelic Cross-Party Group, Scottish Parliament, 31st May 2006.**

Migration and Gaelic community dilution

The rapid contraction of the Gaidhealtachd since 1881 is illustrated on the series of maps in Figure 1. At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th a majority Gaelic area extended over much of the mainland Highlands and the whole of the Hebridean and Clyde Islands. By 2001 there was no longer any local community with a proportion of Gaelic speakers greater than 74.7%. This decline is also illustrated in Figure 2 and its supporting Table. Local majorities of Gaelic speakers are now only to be found in the Western Isles and the northern tip of Skye.

However, public rhetoric from official sources has considerably changed over this period. Today highly supportive utterances come from national and local government spokespersons. **It may be questioned whether this public rhetoric is fully informed of the extent of language-shift that has taken place, or the reasons for it. Likewise whether the social and economic processes affecting Gaelic in society, their nature, scale and impact are fully understood.**

These processes have brought about considerable movement of population from the Highlands and Islands to the Lowland area since the 19th century to the present day. Continuing and increasing migration and mobility have affected all and more particularly Gaelic speakers, who have been as much – if not considerably more – affected by these processes. Policies have gradually since the 1960s begun specifically to tackle these matters – and in recent years have begun to have a specifically Gaelic focus. **If support policies are framed just for the ‘Gaelic areas’, they will affect a diminishing proportion of Scotland’s Gaelic speakers.** In 1881 87% of all Gaelic speakers lived in the Highlands and Islands. In 2001 this proportion had fallen to 55%. **We have probably reached the 50/50 point today (2006), with half of Scotland’s Gaelic speakers living outwith the traditional Highlands and Islands area.** (See Figures 3 and 4 and supporting Table.)

The policy implications of this are twofold: **we are now at the point of last chance to retain majority Gaelic-speaking local communities. However, secondly and importantly these alone will not provide the necessary demographic “mass” to ensure a continuing Gaelic-speaking language-group.** Unless policies provide for the reproduction of Gaelic speakers both in the traditional communities – and wherever else the greater part of Gaelic speakers are now to be found, overall numbers will continue to diminish – and rapidly so to the point of extinction as a living tongue. **This calls for strategic action of a high order from our policy-makers.** If there is to be no effective strategy to retain living Gaelic communities, is it reasonable to ask what would replace them as the principal means of ensuring language reproduction? Could a virtual Gaelic community located somewhere in cyberspace ensure a future for the language?

One of the factors underlying language-shift is migration. This has speeded up over the period, and since 1991 the mobility of Gaelic speakers has now accelerated even further to match it.. The migration maps in Figures 5 and 6 illustrate this, and show a situation in a high state of flux. It will be clear that not only are Gaelic-speakers moving out of their traditional communities, but that large numbers of non-Gaelic-speakers are moving in. Moreover this process is rapidly gaining momentum. In 1990-91 10.4% of Scotland’s total population moved home, including 8.8% of all Gaelic-speakers. Ten years later these proportions had increased

to 11.6% and 11.1% respectively. Annually in Scotland 587,000 persons are on the move, including 6,500 Gaelic speakers. They are now as mobile as anyone else. To put it another way, **over a ten year period the number of people on the move more than equals the total population of Scotland. The number of Gaelic speakers on the move also more than equals the total language-group. Policy-making needs to realise this and to take full account of it.**

We are no longer in the cosy, static, Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands of Para Handy – or even Compton MacKenzie. Sometimes however it seems as if these are the mental images which still underlie official thinking. **The 21st century faces us with a quantum leap and an entirely new situation:-**

- ❑ **In 2001 only 2,281 Gaelic speakers (3.9 % of all Gaelic speakers) were living in a parish (Barvas) where the majority of everyday speech in the community was likely to be in Gaelic.**
- ❑ **Only 16,184 (27.6 % - or just over a quarter) were living in parishes where Gaelic speakers were in a local majority.**
- ❑ **We have probably now reached – or passed - the stage where the Western Isles outwith Stornoway has reached an incidence of 71% of Gaelic speakers.**

In theory where the proportion of Gaelic speakers locally exceeds 71%, there is a better than 71% chance of a Gaelic speaker encountering another and speaking in Gaelic. Thus 71% of 71% is 50.4% , and a bare majority of all everyday speech exchanges in the community are potentially likely to be in Gaelic. Where all sorts of institutional usages, social pressures and non-personal communications (signage, media, officialdom, commercial practice, etc.) are in English, these will be powerful prompts for everyday speech to respond and function in English. National and local language planning is intended to address this. Without it even in strongly Gaelic communities there is a less than a 50% chance of fully-fluent Gaelic speakers using their language on an everyday basis. Local and national policymakers need to address this situation if living Gaelic communities are still to exist at the next census in 2011.

The Euromosaic National Gaelic Usage Study in 1994/5 is our most up-to-date study of Gaelic speakers in the Western Isles. (The more recent Western Isles Language Plan study 2004/5 has to date been analysed only in terms of the population as a whole, and has not undertaken a study of its Gaelic speakers *as such* .) **The Euromosaic Western Isles Gaelic-speaker sample in 1994/5 reported the extent of Gaelic used by respondents-**

- ❑ **over the previous day for 65% of the time, and**
- ❑ **within the community as a whole for 46% of the time.**

These data were also analysed in terms of social identity of speakers (age, gender, occupational class, qualifications and language-loyalty), and **it would clearly be of great value in terms of the present national and local initiatives going forward in this area to have up-to-date information on Gaelic speakers in these respects.**

The policy implications are that powerful measures for language-planning will need to be brought to bear if the balance of local speech exchanges is to be turned round. This can be done if a national language plan is augmented by local and institutional plans, and backed up with charismatic leadership in the local communities.

Policies will need:-

- ❑ **to involve commercial and voluntary enterprise to an even greater scale.**
- ❑ **Even more – they will need to galvanise local community morale**
- ❑ **and incentivise individuals.**
- ❑ **Public consultation will need to develop into ongoing dialogue between policy-makers and their public.**

There will need to be effective two-way communication whenever policy-makers meet. This will require effective strategic action of a higher order than we have so far seen. It might be worthwhile to look at what other language-groups have done in similar situations.

In New Zealand where Māori has retreated rapidly inter-generationally, the traditional meeting-place the *marae* has been developed into a multipurpose social centre functioning in Māori. The language and culture have been featured in the *kohanga rēo* – language nests – where the older generations impart their language directly to the youngest. There are obvious parallels with our own situation. But the Māori solutions seem to be having a greater impact than ours. In Ireland an organisation, *Glór na nGael* (the Voice of the Gaels), runs an inter-communities competition – somewhat on ‘Britain in Bloom’ lines for the local communities – which have best raised the profile of the language and brought it into wider public use. Strategies will need to motivate, to involve and to encourage Gaelic language-use in ways which have not yet been attempted – and will need effectively to raise community morale and language-awareness.

If we wish to retain communities which still use Gaelic in everyday life, this is our final opportunity to do so. It will require vigorous local action in the community, and strong immediate application of a national language plan as a precursor to further action. The introduction of the plan requires a consultation process leading to its adoption and implementation. If this is to be successful policy-makers will need to go much further in communicating with their publics, taking them into its confidence after every meeting and developing an ongoing dialogue to raise community awareness, and turn the situation around.

Family and inter-generational transmission

One of the mental images of the modern family is the nuclear unit of mother, father and 2.4 children - in the case of Gaeldom, Gaelic-speaking parents and Gaelic-speaking children. Nothing could be further from the truth. The sequence of pie-charts in Figures 7 – 10 illustrating family structures depicts a highly complex situation. Family structures are now highly diverse and the diagrams very much simplify this. Intergenerational transmission of Gaelic is very different in different types of family and in different areas. There is a clear implication for policy-makers in this: one size will not fit all. Inter-generational transmission rates are declining rapidly. Outwith the traditional areas in 2001 the 769 families with two Gaelic-speaking parents only comprised 11.5% of all households with Gaelic-speaking adults. They had transmitted the language to only 54.3% of their children. In the case of the 1,001 lone Gaelic-speaking parents they had transmitted Gaelic to only 24.9% of their children. Transmission rates were higher in the more strongly Gaelic areas, but even in the Western Isles the 1,437 families with two Gaelic-speaking parents comprised only 45.0% of all households with Gaelic-speaking adults and these were transmitting the language to only 76.5% of their children. The 307 lone Gaelic-speaking parents comprised 9.6% of all families with a Gaelic-speaking adult, and these were transmitting the language to only 50.5% of their children.

In the 1994/5 Euromosaic Study just over half the respondents reported currently having children. Of these 33% (one third) were reported as always using English. Only 30% (less than one-third) were reported as always or mostly using Gaelic (increasing to 53% if using both languages equally are added in.) Ten years later, the Western Isles Language Plan study reports eight out of ten children within the whole population mainly or always using English. (p. 19). **This seems to suggest a recent and greatly accelerated shift to English on the part of Gaelic-speaking parents and their children. It implies policy initiatives within the family as an urgent priority.**

As can be seen from the graphic sequences, taking together all types of family where all adults speak Gaelic, only 49.1% of their children were likely to have done so as well. Out of 13,851 households where there were Gaelic speaking adults, there was a possible total of 2,699 cases (= 19.5% of the total) where all adults and children may have been Gaelic speaking.

- **Thus fewer than one in five Gaelic speakers were living in households all of whose members spoke Gaelic.**
- **This is our last chance to maintain Gaelic-speaking families in Scotland.**

As the analysis shows they may be living anywhere – and although the greatest concentrations are in the Western Isles and in Skye & Lochalsh, the majority live elsewhere.

These rates of transmission clearly indicate collapsing family confidence in the language and a general lack of infrastructure outwith the family to remedy this deficiency.

Supports for the language within the family are also lacking in effectiveness – or completely lacking altogether. **The weaknesses – and strengths – of this situation should be obvious to policy-makers, similarly the implications for language-strategy.** The potential strength lies in the fact that there is a possibility to develop mini-Gaidhealtachds in households throughout Scotland. But we will need to create institutions which will link them together. From census data we know just how many families with Gaelic speakers of various types there are, and where they are located. **We still lack a strategy to incentivise and support the use of Gaelic in child-rearing. This would seem to be a strategic priority of a very high order.**

However, unless we know what motivates parents to pass on Gaelic to their children and to use Gaelic as the language of the home, we shall be unable to formulate appropriate policies to encourage this. **So there is a clear priority for motivational research into what turns people on to using Gaelic – and what turns them off.** Meanwhile we might try to set up a national organisation to promote Gaelic in the family, as the Welsh did between the wars, when the family was the only domain that Welsh-speakers felt could be maintained as an all-Welsh entity. (*Yr Undeb Genedlaethol*) In Ireland since 1994 a similar organisation supports Irish-speaking households throughout the country. (*Comhluadar*) Even earlier there had been an organisation for Irish-speaking families. (*Na Teaghlaigh Ghaelacha*) So far the nearest we have is *Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Àraich* and *Comunn nam Pàrant* – which do provide a platform to build upon.

Education and reversing language-shift

The Meek Report (2002) observed that the earlier impetus for Gaelic playgroups, Gaelic-medium primary education, and its development into the secondary stage had stalled. (pp. 50-51) This is obvious from Figures 14 – 16. Today four years later it is clear that **the pattern of Gaelic education which has developed to date will not of itself reverse language-shift.** In the 2001 Census it produced little more than a ‘blip on the chart’. Nationally, numbers of Gaelic speakers increased from a pre-school mean of 186 in each of the pre-school years, to

561 per year at the primary stage, 724 at the secondary 1-4 stage, decreasing to 577 in 16-19 age-group and a mean of 415 per year of age amongst 20-24 year-olds. The Meek Report (p. 50) drew attention to the fact that in 2001 only 27% of the children in Gaelic pre-school groups made it into the primary Gaelic-medium stage – and less than 10% into secondary Gaelic-medium streaming. **If Gaelic-medium education is to be understood as part of a strategy of reversing language shift, as currently constituted, it is failing to do so – and cannot reasonably be expected to do so by 2011.** In order to overcome the net annual losses from all causes between 1991 - 2001 (death, migration, lack of language acquisition, and abandonment of language in later life), the Gaelic-medium system would need to function at a level of at least 733 pupils in each year of the pre-school, primary and secondary stages. (Figure 17 shows the shortfall.) The only part of the system which has functioned at a requisite level has been the voluntary CNSA sector up to 1997. (See Figures 11 and 12) Statistics since that date have not been published. To be effective the primary and secondary sectors would need to be geared up to provide for a throughput of this order. Whether the slow improvements in provision, and recent improvements in teacher training can bring this about during the next 5 years is questionable.

Clearly today we have the urgent need of a radical re-think. Yet official rhetoric still looks to this field to deliver the goods. As currently constituted it has no reasonable prospect of doing so – and there is a great deal of denial of what is actually going on.

In the Western Isles school rolls have declined overall. Since 1998 so too has the proportion enrolled in Gaelic-medium units. Currently only 23% of pupils are educated through the medium of Gaelic. Official spokespersons have tried to contend that although school rolls have fallen, the percentage in Gaelic-medium units has risen. This is very far from being the case. This has begun to be recognised, and a start was to have been made for an experimental small number of schools to educate all children in Gaelic for the first two years. In 15 years time this was to have been extended to all schools – with due provision made for those who wish to opt-out. However, it seems that even this limited scheme has been down-sized. **In 15 years time there will be no majority Gaelic communities anywhere in the Western Isles, and this tentative scheme will have little prospect of maintaining majority Gaelic communities in their last feasible locations.**

Unless a thorough-going pattern of provision is adopted on the lines of such Welsh education authorities as Gwynedd, Ceredigion, Ynys Môn and Caerfyrddin, which have proven success and track-record in maintaining the Welsh language communities, there will be little prospect for success with Gaelic. **The same principle of all children whichever language they bring to school also effectively acquiring the other community language needs to be rapidly implemented if policies are to have any chance of success. There is a real need for joined-up strategic thinking, since schools policy and family policy are not separate watertight compartments.** Welsh success faces just the same problems as does Gaelic – at perhaps even more intense levels. There too they face high rates of mobility and mixed language situations within the family of a similar or even greater order. Welsh-medium education is available throughout Wales, and in the main Welsh-speaking areas all children acquire both languages, whatever the language situation is in the homes they come from.

...and finally:

It is now crunch time. Decisions are needed now – to be implemented forthwith. We may have five years up to 2011 to turn the situation around. Is the era of ‘assassination by delay –

too little, too late' to be continued under new auspices – or will a genuine new ethos replace it? In any event, **the 2011 census will provide a crude measure for press and public to judge the success of our policy-makers.** Overall figures may though conceal a real turn-around. More sophisticated measures will be needed to reveal it. What measures will our policy-makers propose ?

In these connections, I have often used the image of ‘ an t-seann taigh-tughaidh na Gàidhlig ’: Tha na h-ùghdarrasan nàiseanta agus ionadail a-nise a’ dòrtadh airgead a-nuas an t-similear air an seann taigh-tughaidh na Gàidhlig: £4.7 millean airson leasachaidh, agus £8.5 millean airson nam meadhannan gach bliadhna. Tha na h-ùghdarrasan a’ saòilsinn gum bheil iad fialaidh leis an airgead - agus bithidh sin gu leòir a’ dèanamh an gnothach do chor na cànan. Chan eil iad deònach a’ coimhead a-steach do na h-uinneagan, agus chan eil iad a’ faicinn air neo fiù ‘s a’ tuigsinn dè tha a’ tachairt taobh a-staigh – gu h-àraidh leis an airgead. Ach tha dùil aca gum bi Gàidheal ùra nan ceudan, nam mìltean, agus nan deich mìltean a’ coiseachd a-mach as an doras aig àm an ath chùinntas-sluaigh.

To look inside the Gaelic world to see what is actually happening on the ground is a basic, necessary preliminary first step to policy-formulation and strategy. This entails research. Successful organisations undertake market research and apply it in all they do. Just to show a colourful PowerPoint for ten minutes sandwiched between more pressing other business is a complete waste of time. There is an urgent need for appropriate research at this stage in Gaelic development. It will need to take new and relevant forms. Without it, formulation of effective policies will not be possible. Although today Gaelic enjoys much more of its rightful share of public funding, that will not be in the least effective in reversing language shift unless there are appropriate strategies which target the crucial areas for language-maintenance and growth.

Kenneth MacKinnon 22.05.06
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Note: the illustrations to this text are available on:-

http://www.sgrud.org.uk/anfy/celtic/migration_family_edu/migration_family_edu.htm
http://www.sgrud.org.uk/anfy/celtic/migration_family_edu/thumbnails.htm

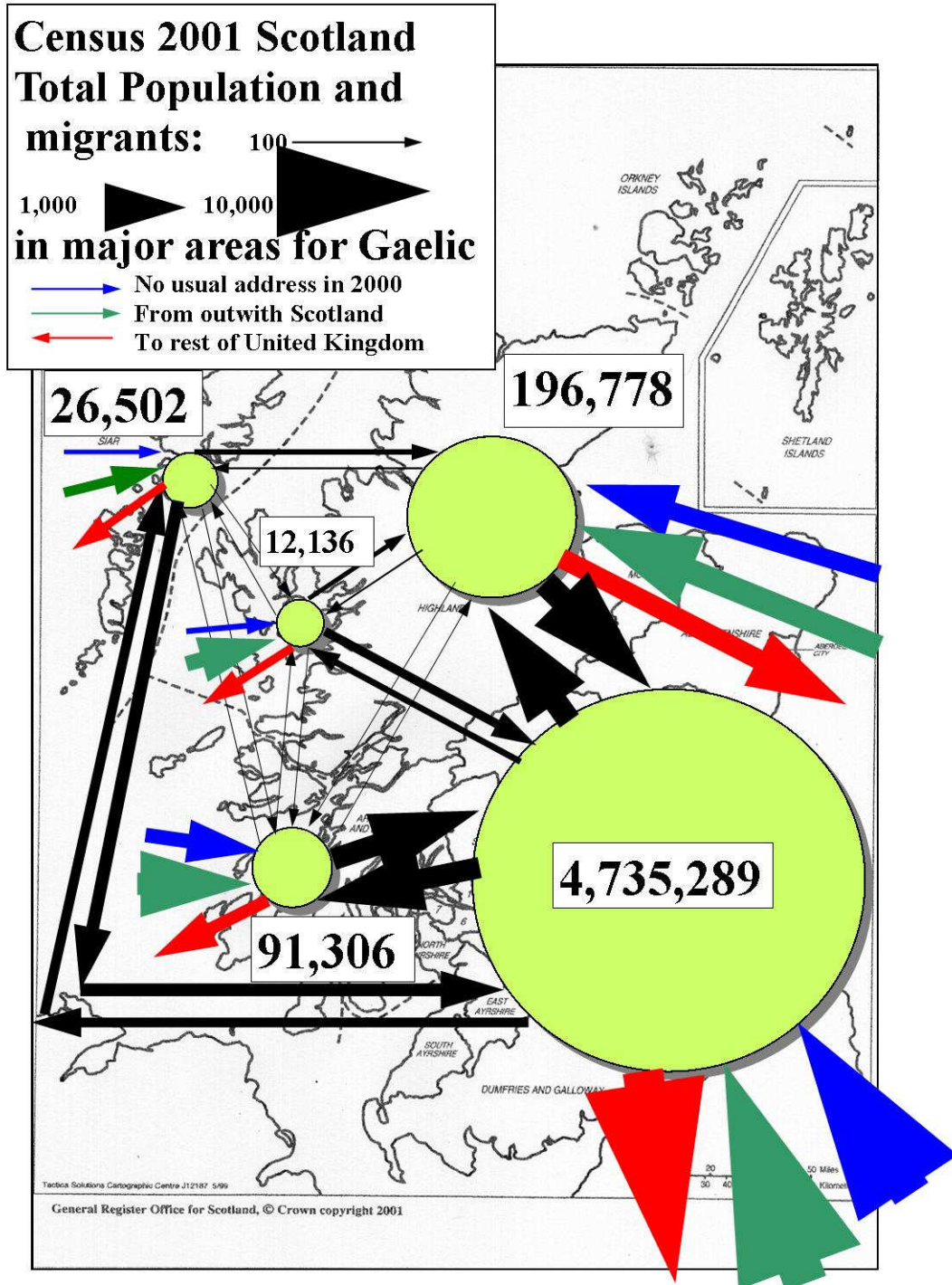
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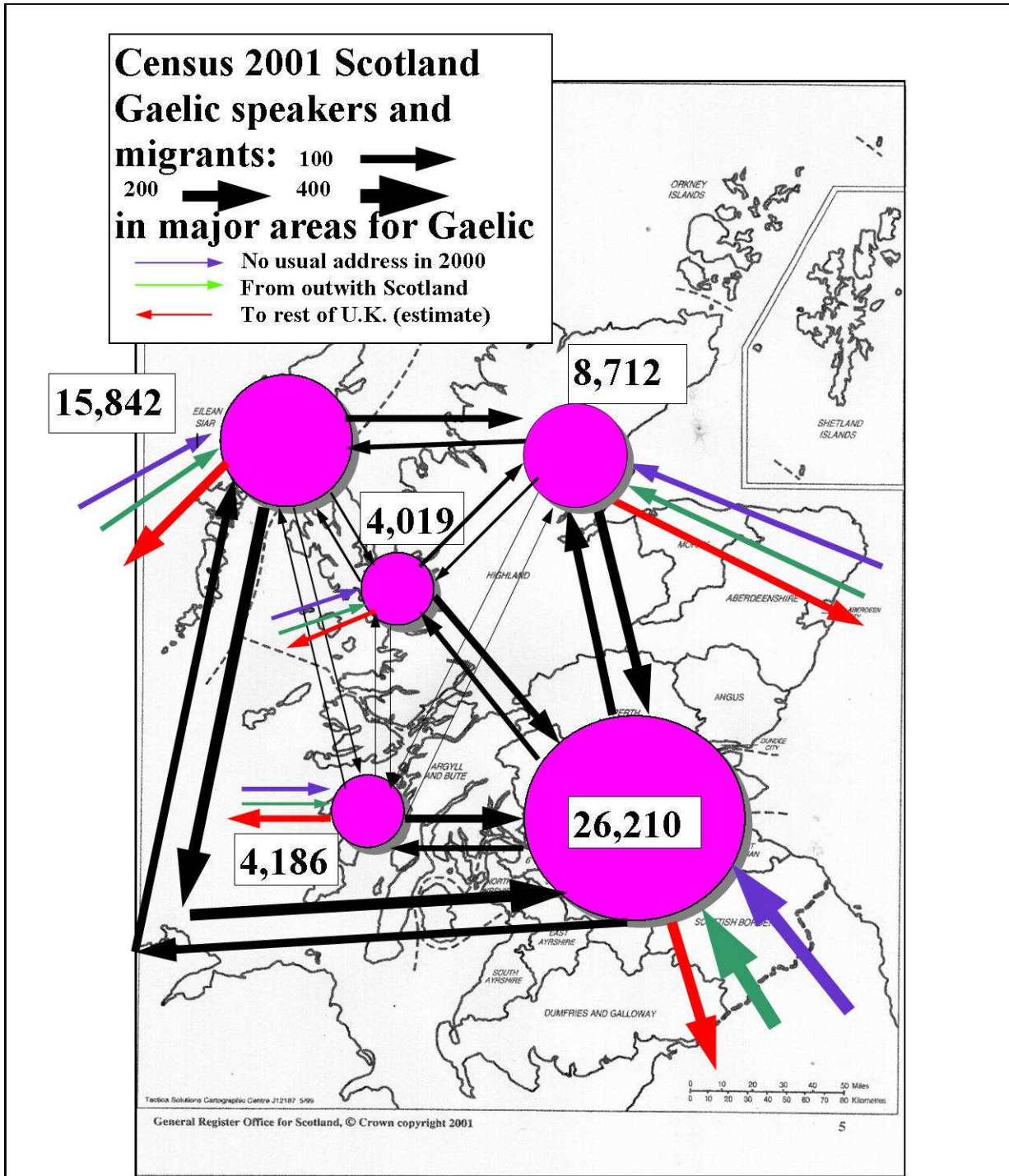
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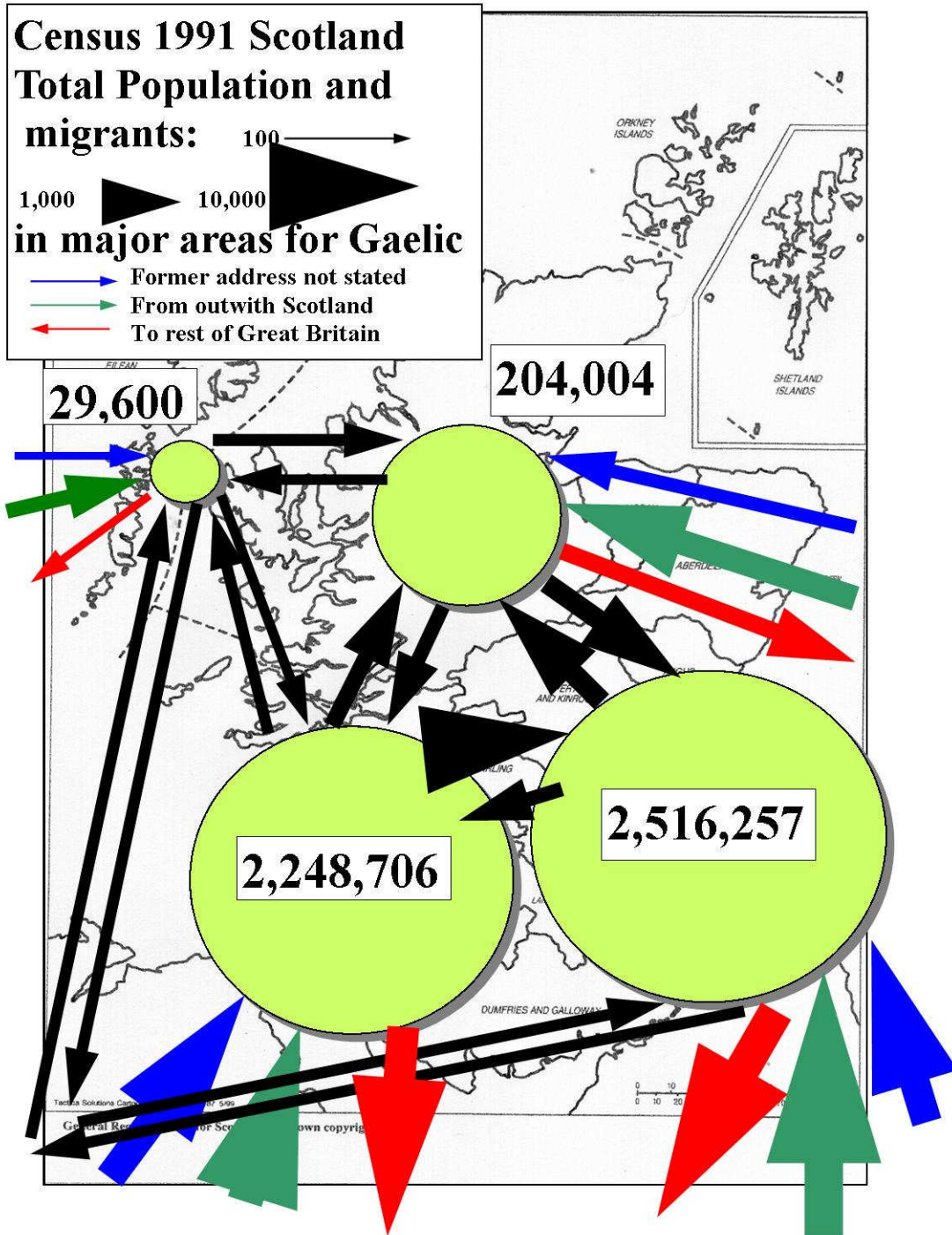
Map 1: 2001 Total population and migrants - major areas for Gaelic.

Source: GROS 2001 Census Gaelic Report, Tables 4, 29; Occasional Paper 11 Migration, Tables 3A, 4.
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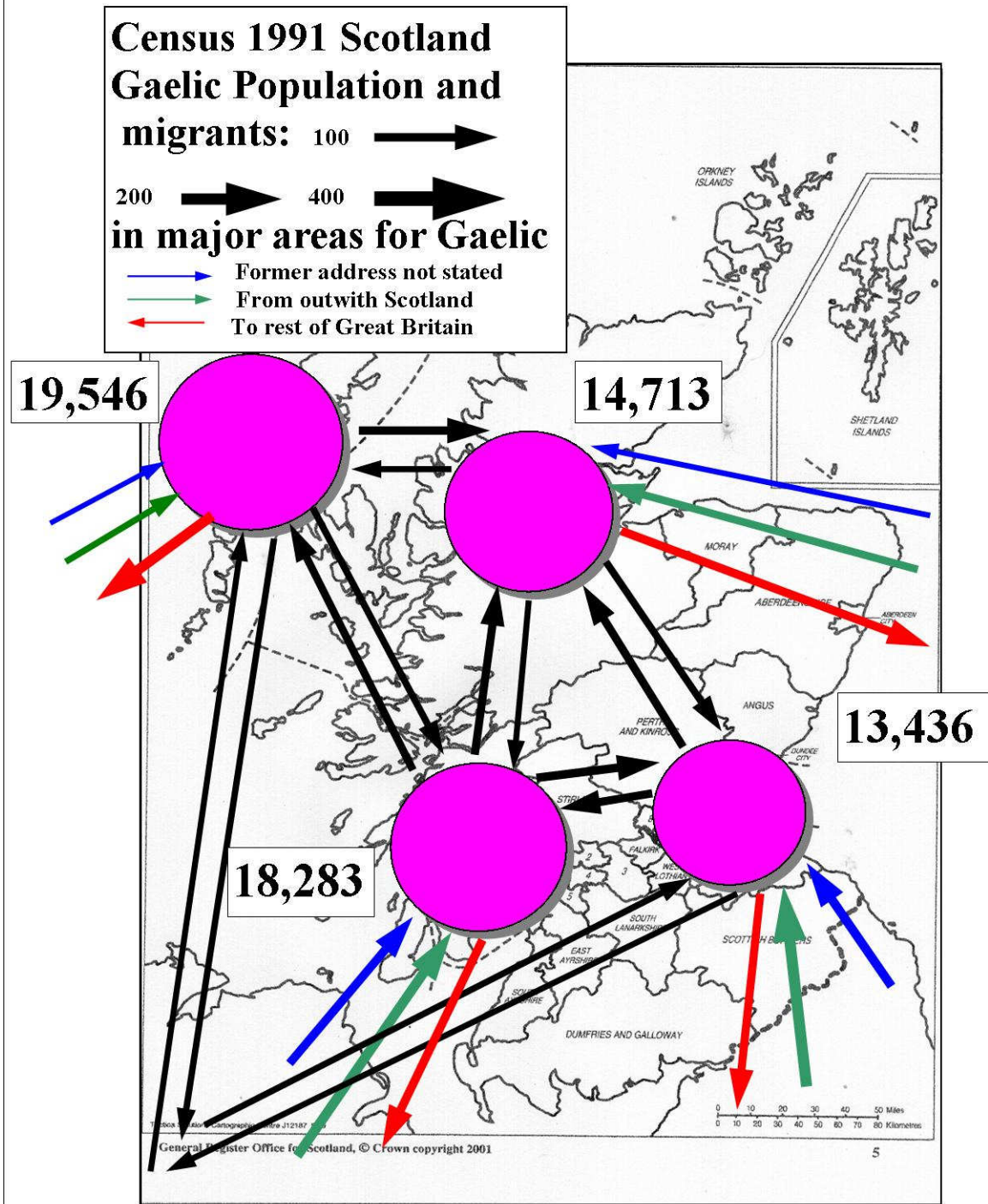
Map 2 : 2001 Gaelic speakers and migrants - major areas for Gaelic.

Source : GROS 2001 Census Gaelic Report, Tables 4, 29; Occasional Paper 11 Migration, Tables 3A, 4.
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Map 3: 1991 Total population and migrants - major areas for Gaelic.

Source: GROS 2001 Census Gaelic Report, Tables 4, 29; Occasional Paper 11 Migration, Tables 3A, 4.
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Map 4: 1991 Gaelic population and migrants - major areas for Gaelic.

Source: GROS 2001 Census Gaelic Report, Tables 4, 29; Occasional Paper 11 Migration, Tables 3A, 4.
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