

'A triumph for free speech' as Irish language newspaper, Lá, avoids closure

Béal Feirste / Belfast 1/24/2005, by **Eoghan ó Néill**

"The overwhelming support which Lá received from readers and supporters, from the Irish language community, and from minority language activists throughout Europe was the primary factor in overcoming this threat [of closure]. This is a victory for the Irish language and it's a triumph for free speech." That was how Ciarán Ó Pronntaigh, editor of the Irish language daily paper Lá described the news that Interreg funding for the paper, which has been delayed for half a year, has at last been given the green light.

The move lifts the threat of closure from Ireland's only Irish language daily. In June of 2004 Lá opened an office in the Donegal Gaeltacht as part of an agreed joint Interreg initiative. In the months that followed various Unionist MPs and Lords tabled a series of parliamentary questions and issued statements to the media condemning public funding for Lá and its publishers, the Andersonstown News Group.

Lady Sylvia Hermon MP described as absolutely outrageous the fact that ANG had received £560,000 of public money and she alleged that ANG was 'an avowedly Republican newspaper group.'

Another Unionist parliamentarian, Lord Laird, stated in a newspaper interview that 'this funding is dangerous for the freedom of the press.' According to Lá these objections led to Interreg aid for the paper being subject to an external appraisal, an unprecedented move in the history of Interreg in Ireland.

In spite of that appraisal and an earlier one both being very positive the Interreg funding for Lá remained frozen until last week's announcement. That delay placed a massive financial burden on the newspaper and just before Christmas they were forced to lay off two full-time journalists and four correspondents and revert to a four rather than five day print run.

Closure threatened, but a vigorous campaign of support for the paper at home and abroad swung things firmly in its favour and at the start of January it was confirmed that Interreg funding will be paid out shortly.

"This was the greatest threat to the paper in its twenty years of existence," Ciarán Ó Pronntaigh told Eurolang. "The phenomenal support from the Irish language community and from language activists right throughout Europe was what ultimately frustrated the Unionist campaign. Over 3,500 people signed our online petition, and there was constant pressure from the community in support of the paper. So it's down to these people that Lá will continue to come out and provide a much needed daily newspaper for the Irish language community."

He also had a word of thanks for MEP Bairbre de Brún and Donegal Councillor Brian Ó Domhnaill who both campaigned to have the Interreg money paid as soon as possible.

Lá has already returned to publishing five days a week and according to Mr Ó Pronntaigh they are looking forward not only to regaining their position of six months ago,

but also to make major breakthroughs in the twelve months ahead.

Meanwhile, Lá has received a further thumbs up, this time in an independent report commissioned by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the North.

The report, commissioned by the Department shortly before Lá relaunched as a daily newspaper in 2003, recommended 'full support' for the paper. Drafted by respected consultants, Venture International, the report outlined the many benefits which a daily Irish language newspaper brings to the community and recommended a substantial increase in grant aid over and above the £157,000 which Lá receives at present from Foras na Gaeilge. (Eurolang © 2005)

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