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THE IRISH GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS ON THE POSITION OF THE  
IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Thank you for your minute of 6 June which records the Secretary of State's agreement to the suggested response to the Irish Government's proposals contained in my submission of 2 May.
2. As requested, I attach for the Secretary of State's approval a note based on the submission designed to be handed over to the Irish at the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference. Because of other pressures, I am afraid that I have not had time to clear it with interested colleagues.
3. A separate speaking note on the subject is included in the Secretary of State's Conference brief.

Francis Elliott

MISS D F E ELLIOTT  
CPL

13 June 1986

PBD

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## THE POSITION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Irish Government presented proposals on the Irish language to the Intergovernmental Conference on 10 January under Articles 4 and 5 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which state that it shall be a framework for the accommodation of the rights and identities of the two traditions in Northern Ireland; and shall concern itself with measures to do so, including steps to foster the cultural heritage of both. It was agreed that the British side would study the paper. The subject would be discussed at a future Conference meeting.

2. This note describes the UK Government's approach to the use of Irish in Northern Ireland and responds to the Irish Government's specific suggestions for change.

## GENERAL POLICY

3. Everyone in Northern Ireland speaks English. There are no native Irish speakers. There is no official estimate of the number of people who have a knowledge of Irish. But from the information available the number is likely to be small. Against this background, the Government recognises and supports the wish of individuals to speak and use the Irish language but not to the extent of promoting a bilingual society. We respond to demand through the education system and through support for the arts. Government policies in Scotland and Wales are similarly based on positive reaction to the will and wish of people to speak Scots Gaelic or Welsh. In Wales these factors are so strong and widespread that Welsh has been accorded parity of esteem with English.

4. The UK Government is pledged in the Anglo-Irish Agreement to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions; there is no requirement to create a bilingual society in Northern Ireland. The overall objective is to promote reconciliation between them. It would arouse great opposition among the majority if Irish in Northern Ireland were given parity of esteem with English. This would not help reconciliation. Nor does the number of



people estimated to speak it justify that status. Nonetheless, we believe that it may be possible within our policy to give more recognition to the use of Irish to acknowledge the importance which some of the minority attach to the language.

#### RESPONSE TO THE IRISH GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS

5. The Irish Government's proposals are set out below, followed by the UK Government's response to each.

#### 6. Place names

(1) A list of place names in Northern Ireland should be drawn up giving the original Irish, as well as English, forms; public authorities should recognise both.

In Northern Ireland there is no statutory basis for determining the official name of a place. By custom and tradition, the Ordnance Survey is the authority. There is no procedure whereby place names can be changed. We will consider the case for change, taking into account practice in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, including the work of the Dublin Place Names Commission. We will also investigate the possibility of sponsoring an Irish language version of the Northern Ireland Ordnance Survey Map, with a directory giving the meanings of the names. Recognition of Irish place names by public authorities may have resource implications and is more problematic. But we shall investigate the implications of so doing if a satisfactory Ordnance Survey directory can be produced.

(ii) The residents of a defined district should be entitled to have street names displayed in Irish as well as English; (they are allowed only in English at present).

We agree that it would be right to allow local residents to decide whether or not they want bilingual street names. This is a District Council responsibility. DOE are considering how best to amend the Public Health & Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949 to provide a scheme which would recognise local preferences,



but could not be abused by the majority in control of each District Council. Implementation of the proposal will be dependent upon identification of a practical scheme.

(iii) Road signs should also be in Irish and English.

We do not believe that dual language road signs would be justified by common use (the criterion used in Wales) and indeed in many parts of Northern Ireland, would probably provoke a counter-productive reaction among the majority against the Irish language. We therefore do not propose to adopt this suggestion.

#### 7. Official business

Legal provision (similar to the Welsh Language Act 1967) should be taken to permit the use of Irish in official business, including the courts.

8. The Welsh Language Act 1967 allows Welsh to be used in the courts by anyone who so desires, and permits Ministers to provide Welsh versions of official documents and forms. It is thus based on large concentrations of Welsh speakers, many of whom are within public administration. Welsh is used in official business on the basis of demand, likely use and cost. In the courts, little business, criminal or civil, is conducted in Welsh; but facilities are provided if they are requested. These arrangements flow from the widespread use of Welsh as a language of daily life. This is not the case with Irish in Northern Ireland. We therefore believe that it would not be appropriate to grant Irish the parity of esteem which Welsh enjoys.

#### 9. The 1991 Census

A question should be included to find out how many people say that they know Irish.



10. There is a lack of information about the number of people professing a knowledge of Irish. We shall include questions about the degree of interest in and knowledge of the Irish language in the Continuous Household Survey for 1987. In the light of the results obtained, we shall consider the desirability of including a question in the 1991 Census.

11. Support for Irish language publications, cultural events

A new authority should be established to promote the language as a vehicle for accommodating the nationalist identity, rather than on artistic merit.

12. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland provides support for writing in Irish and for traditional arts. Requests for support for publications in English and Irish are treated in exactly the same way and decided on artistic merit. In the last five years only two manuscripts in Irish have been submitted. One was given a publishing grant. A third application is under consideration. The traditional arts budget is £30,000. A native Irish speaker and expert on traditional music heads the relevant section. We have no evidence of unsatisfied demand. Nonetheless we shall invite the Arts Council to consider whether it would like additional funds for the traditional arts, in particular for Irish language and cultural activities.

13. We believe however that it would be inappropriate to set up a separate body to promote the Irish language. In Northern Ireland many traditional arts, such as music, are shared by Protestant and Catholic communities, especially in rural areas. The objective should be to promote shared interests in these activities. The establishment of an Irish language body would be divisive. It might stimulate calls for a new authority to encourage unionist "Ulster" arts.



## SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

14. The UK Government recognises and supports the wish of individuals to speak and use the Irish language. But it would not promote peace, stability and reconciliation - the overall objective of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - to promote bilingualism in Northern Ireland. Against this background, the Government's response to the Irish Government's proposals is as follows.

- i) We will consider the case for a procedure to enable place names to be changed. We will investigate the possibility of sponsoring an Irish version of the Northern Ireland Ordnance Survey map, with a directory giving the meanings of the names. If that can be done, we shall consider the implications of public authorities recognising the Irish version.
- ii) The residents of a defined district should be entitled to have street names displayed in Irish as well as in English. Work is in hand on a practical scheme to implement this.
- iii) To introduce dual language road signs would provoke a counter-productive reaction against the use of Irish amongst the majority and the proposal will therefore not be adopted.
- iv) There is no need for Irish to be given parity of esteem with English in official business and the courts. The number who speak it and the widespread prevalence of English as the everyday language militate against following law and practice in Wales.
- v) The UK Government lack precise information about the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland, the extent of their knowledge and interest. Questions about the Irish language will be included in the 1987 Continuous Household Survey. In the light of the results, consideration will be given to including a question in the 1991 census.

vi) It would not aid reconciliation to set up a separate body to promote the Irish language as an expression of the nationalist tradition instead of on grounds of artistic or literary merit. But we shall invite the Arts Council for Northern Ireland to consider whether there is greater scope through its support for traditional arts for giving financial assistance to Irish cultural activities.

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

June 1986