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Duplicate



RBS 167/1

cc PS/Ministers (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Brennan
NI Perm Secs
Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott
Mr Gilliland
Mr Spence
Mr Bell
Miss Elliott
Mr G Hewitt
Mr S Hewitt
Mr McConnell

Secretary of State (L&B)

THE USE OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. You asked me to provide a progress report by the end of July on:-
 - a. the establishment of a list of place names in Irish;
 - b. sponsorship of an Irish language version of the Ordnance Survey Map of Northern Ireland with an accompanying gazetteer; and
 - c. a scheme to allow street names to be displayed in Irish as well as English where the residents so desired.
2. My approach to this matter is based on a strong conviction that any movement towards bilingualism in Northern Ireland should be strongly resisted. I consider it reasonable to recognise and respect the interest which a comparatively small number of people in Northern Ireland may have in the Irish language. To do more than this would however have serious administrative as well as political repercussions.

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Place Names

3. Our aim might be to produce a list of the Irish version of the major place names in Northern Ireland which would be accepted in correspondence and official purposes by all public bodies. The matter is, however, by no means straightforward.
4. The present place names in Northern Ireland have different origins - some are the anglicised version of the original Irish; others are English names of new settlements for which no Irish name existed. Through custom and practice the Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland has become the custodian of place names but there is no legislation which gives status to place names or provides for names to be changed. There is therefore no simple straightforward Irish version for all place names and the compilation of a comprehensive list agreed by the experts could take many years. We have established through contacts by officials that the Place Names Commission in Dublin has been at work for over 40 years and is a long way from completing its task. The Commission has confirmed that translation of Northern Ireland place names into Irish would take a lengthy period if it is to be done properly.
5. In order to make progress I suggest that we might approach the matter in 2 stages -
 - 5.1 We should give financial support - probably to the Department of Irish Studies at Queen's University - to carry out the detailed research work necessary to produce an agreed comprehensive and authoritative list of the Irish version of place names in Northern Ireland.
 - 5.2 In the meantime we should produce an interim list of Northern Ireland place names in Irish. We can utilise work already carried out by the Irish to produce an interim list fairly quickly - possibly by the end of the year - and we can take up the offer of assistance from the Irish Place Names Commission as appropriate.
6. Consideration will however have to be given as to how official recognition of place names in Irish is to be achieved. I can readily envisage some District Councils refusing to acknowledge any name other than in English and I can foresee logistical problems in my two Departments in coping with

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an admixture of English and Irish place names. The problem, however, goes much wider than DHSS and DOE as all NI Departments and some UK Departments such as Inland Revenue and the Post Office will be affected. Then there are the Courts, RUC, Area Boards and the public sector generally. I would expect SF to exploit to the full any flaws in legal proceedings if Irish and English versions of place names are to be interchangeable. Legislation to give legal force to a place name in Irish may well be necessary.

7. At the same time consideration might also be given to the parallel problem where individuals seek to use the Irish version of their personal names. The same problems and principles arise. Public bodies and the Courts will presumably be required to recognise the Irish version and this again may require legislation. I understand that some parts of NICS already give some recognition to personal names in Irish but there is not as far as I am aware any clear policy on the matter throughout the public sector. The general issues raised in paragraphs 6 and 7 would, I suggest need to be considered at the centre.

Irish Language Map

8. The Irish Ordnance Survey already publishes an Irish language map which covers Northern Ireland. I understand that since it was produced some years ago sales have not yet reached 1,000 copies. It is unlikely that there would be any commercial basis for a similar map to be produced by Ordnance Survey NI and the case for doing so could only be presented on political grounds.
9. The most appropriate scale for such a map would be 1:250,000 (4 miles to the inch) which would identify practically all settlements of any significance; the map could be accompanied by a Gazetteer listing the Irish equivalent alongside the usual English name. This could be based on the work described at paragraph 5.2.

Street Names

10. I gather that the Irish place heavy significance on early progress in removing the prohibition on the use of any language other than English in street signs. Apparently they consider that this would help to reduce the

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publicity and support which SF has obtained through the illegal erection of street signs in Irish. The Irish are accordingly pressing strongly for us to publish in the autumn proposals for a draft Order.

11. I have considered what form our proposals might take and I have concluded that:-

11.1 A simple removal of the prohibition on the use of Irish is unlikely to be sufficient; it would fall to District Councils to act and in practice only Nationalist Councils would move to erect dual language signs. In Belfast the Council would do nothing and SF would continue to make the running in areas where they have influence.

11.2 Dual language street signs should only be erected where it is clearly the wish of the local community to have them. This would have to be determined by a local ballot. I had previously thought this might be conducted at Ward level but as one would have to be able to demonstrate that a substantial majority of the electors in a specific location desired the change I have concluded that it would be more sensible that the decision should be taken on a street by street basis. The definition of 'street' will however require careful consideration. On a matter such as this a simple majority would not be appropriate as one needs to show an overwhelming majority in favour and I have in mind that the majority required should be as high, say as 85%.

11.3 Responsibility for the erection of street signs should remain with the District Council but safeguards will have to be provided to prevent a Council imposing dual language signs where they are not wanted or refusing to erect them in areas which have expressed a desire to have them. I would wish to avoid setting up a formal appeal procedure involving my Department, the Courts or some new QUANGO created for the purpose.

12. Accordingly I envisage an Order in Council which would provide that:-

12.1 The prohibition on languages other than English, shall be removed.

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- 12.2 Where a District Council is satisfied that at least 85% of the local government electors in a street so desire the Council shall erect the street sign in Irish as well as English.
- 12.3 In order to satisfy itself as to the electors' wishes the Council shall, if so requested by a Councillor or by a petition signed by more than half of the electors in a street, cause a ballot to be held.
13. Any aggrieved person who considered that the Council had failed to discharge its statutory responsibilities could then seek redress in the Courts in the normal way.
14. The likely cost to District Councils of a change to dual language signs is difficult to estimate. In the Newry Council area for example if all the 1300 listed streets had dual language signs the cost would be around £80,000 with the cost of balloting to be added. The degree of take up would of course vary from Council to Council. I would expect that Councils, particularly those controlled by Unionists, would demand that Government should meet the cost.

Conclusion

15. Subject to the views of colleagues I propose that we should proceed as follows:-
- 15.1 DOE should fund research leading to a comprehensive list of place names in Irish.
- 15.2 DOE should draw on the work already carried out by the Irish authorities and produce a interim list of the Irish version of major place names.
- 15.3 NIO and Central Secretariat should consider further the implications of official recognition of place names and personal names in Irish.
- 15.4 DOE should produce an Irish language version of the 4 miles to 1 inch map of NI.

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15.5 DOE should sponsor legislation to be published in the autumn to remove the prohibition on the use of Irish in street name signs and requiring District Councils to erect dual language signs where a substantial majority of the electors in a street so desire.

16. I understand that the Irish have tabled further ideas about the use of Irish language and these are being considered by officials in NIO and NI Departments. I have not considered these further ideas in this response.
17. I also understand that a bid has been made to the Treasury to meet Anglo-Irish costs and I would expect any costs incurred by Departments in recognising Irish place names would be included under this head.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Needham'.

RICHARD NEEDHAM

30th July 1986

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