

THE IRISH GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS ON THE POSITION OF THE  
IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND1. Introduction

... The Irish Government presented the attached paper to the Intergovernmental Conference on 10 January under Articles 4 and 5 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They state that the Conference 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 and respond to it, initially, through the Secretariat. The subject would be discussed at a future Conference meeting. The purpose of this submission is to seek the Secretary of State's endorsement of a general approach to the use of Irish in Northern Ireland and to a suggested response to the specific proposals put forward by the Irish Government.

2. Irish objectives

The Irish Government consider that the Irish language is central to the Irish nationalist tradition but that this has been insufficiently recognised in Northern Ireland. They are concerned that organisations such as Sinn Fein, which vigorously promote its use, are exploiting the emotions which the language arouses. To remedy this, they suggest that the Government should encourage the growth of the language and make it more visible throughout Northern Ireland. Their proposals which are based on practice in the Republic and, to a certain extent, in Wales, are as follows.

a) Place names

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



- Road signs should also be in Irish and English.
- b) 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.
- c) 1991 Census
  - A question should be included to find out how many people say that they know Irish.
- d) 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.

These suggestions have to be considered in the context of a general Government policy on the use of Irish in Northern Ireland.

Present Government policy in Northern Ireland

3. There is no official estimate of the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. One private, probably optimistic, guess is that there are about 50,000 - 7% of the population. About 20,000 children study Irish in secondary schools: 1,700 of them took 'O' level and 300 sat 'A' level examinations in 1985. There are no particular parts of Northern Ireland where Irish speakers predominate. And everyone can speak English.

4. Against this background, the Government's policy is to respond to demand through the education system and support for the arts. School authorities and head teachers decide whether Irish should be taught in response to parental wishes. Bunscoil Gaelighe, where teaching is in Irish, has been recognised as a grant-aided school. And a special Irish unit has been approved at Steelstown Primary School, Londonderry. DENI has a specialist Irish language school inspector. Colleges of Further Education and universities provide courses on the Irish language and literature.



The Northern Ireland Arts Council supports traditional cultural activities and Irish language publications of literary merit. Although the traditional arts budget is only £30,000 a year, DENI have no evidence of unsatisfied demand.

5. But there is no attempt to promote bilingualism (which is Irish Government policy in the Republic) or to accord Irish special status (such as is given to Welsh in Wales). Thus pressure for Irish to be used in official business and the Courts is resisted.

Comparisons with Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland

6. In Scotland and Wales the Government's policy is 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.

7. In Scotland there are about 85,000 Gaelic speakers concentrated in the West. The language has no status in the Courts or in official business. The Government responds to initiatives from Gaelic speaking communities. Financial support (£440,000 in 1985 to 1986) is given partly through the Highlands and Island Development Board and the Scottish Arts Council to a wide range of Gaelic voluntary organisations. And it is for local education authorities to decide the extent to which Gaelic teaching may be provided in schools. (There are bilingual schools in the Western Isles and one in Glasgow.)

8. In Wales, according to the 1981 Census, about 500,000 people speak Welsh - 18.9% of the population. Although everyone understands English, in some areas a majority prefers to use Welsh for daily business. 81% speak it in the district council area of Dwyfor in Gwynedd, and percentages of between 60%/80% in other district council areas are not uncommon. 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.



9. The Welsh Office's public expenditure programme contains an identifiable item for Welsh language education [and cultural activities], which totalled £2.7m. in 1986/87. Again, local education authorities decide whether Welsh should be taught in schools. There are opportunities for further study in universities and colleges of further education. The Welsh Arts and Welsh Books Councils support cultural activities, but on artistic merit, not solely because of the use of Welsh. (The Welsh fourth television channel is financed not by the Government but by the IBA and independent companies - to the tune of £32m. a year--although they take a slightly reduced levy on the revenue.).

10. In the Irish Republic the philosophy underlying Government policy towards the use of Irish is different. Since the late 19th century, the language has been linked with the nationalist movement. Once the Irish Free State was established, the revival of the language became a major priority. By the late 1930s in many schools there was teaching through the medium of Irish and the passing of public examinations depended upon success in Irish. By the 1960s, it was accepted that education had suffered from this concentration and that the language was not growing as intended. During the 1960s and 70s the emphasis on Irish was reduced. Nevertheless, it remains a prerequisite for entry to all the universities, except Trinity College, and it remains an obligatory subject in schools. Teachers must have qualifications in Irish and so must certain civil servants. Special institutions to preserve the Gaeltacht areas remain. The language retains its symbolic function as the first language of the State. But the Irish authorities acknowledge privately that compulsion has failed. 25% to 30% of the population claim to know Irish reasonably well: a further 30% to 40% record themselves as having some knowledge. (In the Gaeltacht these figures are much higher.)

Should the Government change its policy in the light of the Anglo-Irish Agreement?

11. The previous paragraphs show that there is a fundamental difference between Government policy towards Celtic languages



throughout the United Kingdom and the Irish Government's attitude towards Irish. The Government recognises and supports the wish of individuals to speak and use these languages, but not to the extent of promoting a bilingual society. Both the Scottish and Welsh Offices are very conscious that current support for Welsh and Scots Gaelic could be jeopardised by any attempt to impose bilingualism on an unreceptive majority. This would be even more unpopular in Northern Ireland.

12. If the Irish Government want to encourage a greater use of Irish in Northern Ireland in order to create a bilingual society, this seems to go beyond the provisions of the Agreement. The Government is pledged to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions. The overall objective is to promote reconciliation between them so that they may live more confidently and easily together. It does not seem appropriate to give Irish in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, the status which it enjoys in the Republic. Nor do the numbers of people estimated to speak it justify the parity of esteem which Welsh enjoys alongside English in Wales. We therefore recommend that the principles behind the present policy remain valid.

13. Nonetheless it may be possible within that policy to give more recognition to the use of Irish to demonstrate the Government's sensitivity to the importance which some of the minority attach to the language. The Irish Government claim that nationalists have felt this to be neglected. For our part, we are not sure of the true extent or nature of the interest which may exist.

Possible response to the Irish Government's specific proposals

14. We now consider the Irish Government's suggestions, described in paragraph 2.

a) Place names

- The Secretary of State has accepted that it would be right to allow local residents to decide whether or not they want bilingual street names. [DOE are considering how best to amend the Public Health & Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949

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to effect this.] Place names fall into a different category. 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. And there is no procedure whereby place names can be changed. (There is no statutory scheme in Wales but an Advisory Committee determines the appropriate Welsh form where common usage makes it desirable and appropriate.) [DOE consider that this should be remedied]. But the Irish request that the Irish form be used and acknowledged by public authorities, including the Post Office, is more problematic. This would not be justified on grounds of usage. And it would probably provoke a counter-productive reaction among the majority if adopted in many parts of Northern Ireland, for example, on road signs. (In Wales the use of dual signs is decided again on grounds of usage). But against this background, we recommend that DOE should find out how the Dublin Place Names Commission operates as it further considers the issue.

b) Official business

- The Irish suggest that legislative provision should be taken to give Irish the same status in public business and legal proceedings as provided for by the Welsh Language Act 1967. The Welsh Office decide whether to print forms in Welsh on the basis of demand, likely use and cost. Letters in Welsh are replied to likewise. In the Courts, not a great deal of business, criminal or civil, is conducted in Welsh. But facilities are provided if they are requested. Four Crown Courts have had instantaneous translation equipment installed. In County Courts, where there is no such equipment, parties give notice when an interpreter is likely to be required. They are selected from a list held by the Lord Chancellor's Department. No special recruitment is necessary because the Court Service has Welsh speakers on its staff. Their fees and expenses are low.

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(In 1985/86 approximately £4,000 in the Crown Court and £460 in the County Court.)

- 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 recommend that it would not be appropriate to grant Irish the parity of esteem which Welsh enjoys.

c) 1991 Census

- It is proposed that there should be a question in the 1991 Census designed to establish the number of people professing a knowledge of Irish. Given the Government's limited knowledge of the number of Irish speakers, it is difficult to argue against this suggestion on broad political grounds. There are parallels in Wales and Scotland. In Wales, even allowing for a slightly inflated figure, thanks to campaigning enthusiasts, the Census statistics are used to justify financial support for the Welsh language to the uninterested majority. The district council breakdown is thought to be useful to educational planners.
- However, DENI consider that educational facilities for the use of Irish need to be determined less by changing numbers than by the level of interest shown in the learning of Irish. Shifts of this kind require a more sensitive monitor than the decennial Census. Moreover, DFP believe that the Census form should be kept as short as possible for reasons of cost and efficiency, and the addition of a question on such a sensitive topic might have a negative effect on response rates, in particular to the voluntary question about religion. They recommend that a more efficient means of obtaining accurate information might be through the Continuous Household Survey. This began in 1983 and samples approximately 1% of the private households in Northern Ireland each year. It aims to provide reliable

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statistics on the social and economic conditions of the population. Because the content of the Survey is held constant throughout the year, the first opportunity to insert a question about Irish would be in January 1987.

- There is undoubtedly a lack of information about the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. We recommend, therefore that a question about knowledge of the Irish language should be included in the Continuous Household Survey for 1987. And in the context of practice in Wales and Scotland we recommend that DFP should give further consideration to including a question in the 1991 Census.

d) Support for Irish language publications, cultural events

- The Arts Council of Northern Ireland provides support for writing in Irish and for traditional arts. (The Scottish and Welsh Arts Councils provide similar assistance.) Requests for support for publications in English and Irish are treated in exactly the same way. Manuscripts are referred to a panel for readers' reports. The Irish panel is centred on the Department of Celtic Studies at Queens University, and the Arts Council has on its staff a native Irish speaker distinguished in literary circles. The role of the panel is to decide whether the manuscript, whether in English or Irish, merits publication on grounds of literary merit. In the last five years, only two manuscripts in Irish have been submitted to the Arts Council. One was given a publishing grant. A third application is under consideration. As for the traditional arts, there is a budget of some £30,000 to spend and a native Irish speaker and acknowledged expert on traditional music heads the relevant section.
- We do not recommend that it would be appropriate to set up a separate body to promote the Irish language per se. 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 interest in these activities. The establishment of an Irish language body might be divisive. It might stimulate calls for a new authority to encourage unionist "Ulster" arts. But we recommend that DENI should consult the Arts Council to find out whether they believe that there is a demand for additional expenditure on Irish language and cultural activities: and if so, every effort should be taken to meet it.

#### 15. Summary and conclusion

##### General

- a) We recommend that the Government's current policy of supporting the wishes of members of the minority to use Irish remains valid.
- b) We do not believe that it would promote peace, stability and reconciliation - the overall objectives of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - to promote bilingualism in Northern Ireland.

##### Response to Irish proposals

- c) We agree that there is a case for allowing the residents of a defined district to decide whether they want bilingual street names. [DOE are working out a scheme to effect this.]
- d) We do not accept that there is a comparable case for using and recognising the Irish form of place names. To impose this generally throughout Northern Ireland, for example through road signs, might provoke a counter-productive reaction against the use of Irish among the majority. Nonetheless, we recognise that there is no statutory authority for deciding on or changing the authorised form of place names. We recommend that DOE should explore the work and methods of the Dublin Placenames Commission.
- e) We do not recommend that Irish should be given parity of esteem with English in official business and the courts. The numbers who speak it and the widespread prevalence of English as the everyday language militate against following law and practice in Wales.



f) We acknowledge that we do not have precise information about the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. We recommend that a question designed to find out how many profess to do so should be included in the 1987 Continuous Household Survey. [We shall give further consideration to including a similar question in the 1991 Census.]

g) We recommend that it would not be appropriate 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 recommend that DENI explore with the Arts Council for Northern Ireland whether there is greater scope for giving financial assistance to Irish cultural activities.

I should be grateful to know if the Secretary of State and Mr Scott approve these recommendations. [Mr Needham and Dr Mawhinney are content.] If so, we shall transmit reactions to the Irish Government through the Secretariat.

MISS D F E ELLIOTT  
CPL

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