

9/16
E.R.

PERSONAL and CONFIDENTIAL

Mr Chesterton

cc PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Sir K Bloomfield -M
Mr Burns
Mr A W Stephens - M
Mr Barry DOE - M
Mr Parkes DENI - M
Mr Elliott - M
Mr Spence - M
Mr Green DENI - M
Mr Bell
Mr Blackwell - M
Mr G Hewitt - M
Mr S Hewitt - M
Mr McConnell PAB - M
Mr Hamilton - M
Mr Rickard



IRISH LANGUAGE ISSUES

Following on from a brief discussion of this subject at the last PDG meeting, I attach a draft submission. Unfortunately, this has taken much longer to finalise than we had hoped and I am sure that it is important that it should reach the Secretary of State no later than the end of this week. I should therefore be most grateful if you and other recipients could let me have any comments to meet that timescale, and I apologise for the rush.

S. C. Kirk

D C KIRK
8 July 1987

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PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - M

cc PS/Ministers (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Sir K Bloomfield - M
Mr A W Stephens - M
Mr Burns
NI Perm Secs - M
Mr Elliott - M
Mr Steele - M
Mr Spence - M
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Mr McConnell PAB - M

IRISH LANGUAGE ISSUES

1. Last year there was an exchange of papers, and discussions with the Irish at official and Ministerial level, on Irish language issues. The Joint Statement on the Intergovernmental Conference meeting on 17 June recorded that:

"The Conference discussed the position of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. The British side described current administrative practice in this field and indicated a number of specific areas for possible future development eg dual language street names where the local community so desires, ascertaining more precisely the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland and financial support for Irish language related cultural activities."

2. In her submissions of 14 October and 9 January, my predecessor discussed these and other issues and proposed a line to take at a further IC meeting which, in the event, did not take place. Subsequently, the Secretary of State asked that we should consider the whole matter further in the light of any views we could glean from the new Irish Government. In a letter of 11 May to the Secretary of State, Mr Lenihan commented: ~~in respect of the Irish language:~~

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"The Irish language is, of course, of great symbolic importance to nationalists. You have referred to a number of issues as ripe for decision: this would be an appropriate moment to bring them forward. You have been considering an amendment of the 1949 Act to remove the provision by which street names may be put up or painted in the English language only, the preparation of a Gazetteer of the Irish language versions of place names in Northern Ireland and the provision of increased funding through the Arts Council for Irish language activities. I understand that an Ordnance Survey map in both languages is at an advanced stage of preparation which could now be published ..."

3. In response, the Secretary of State said that he hoped the Irish language issues, along with other matters, could be taken forward, with a view to making progress after the UK general election. We have yet to hold a meeting with Irish ~~government~~ officials and it may be helpful, in advance, for Ministers to review the current position on issues where progress has been made since we last spoke to the Irish; issues that have been left unresolved; and those on which further work, in consultation with Northern Ireland Departments, will be needed. Accordingly, this submission invites the Secretary of State to endorse our broad policy objectives and to consider, in particular, the issues raised at the earlier IC meeting and more recently by Mr Lenihan. In the light of this advice, the Secretary of State will wish to consider the line to be taken at the next IC meeting, if the subject is raised, and the stance we might therefore take at an official-level meeting.

Policy on the Irish Language

4. The new Irish Government seems likely to take a more determined line, if anything, than its predecessor on Irish language issues. Mr Haughey has appointed himself Minister for the Gaeltacht. He is supported by a Minister of State. The

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Irish Government's aim will be to deliver something that can be presented as having positive benefit to nationalists; and that will demonstrate that the Irish language is not the unique preserve of Sinn Fein.

5. The Irish language is useful to Sinn Fein as a symbol of Irish identity/unity. As the only 'political' grouping who espouse the issue both North and South, Sinn Fein can use it to wrong-foot the SDLP and create division between the communities. It can also be used to annoy the security forces and as a secret language eg in prisons. Support for the language enhances Sinn Fein's image of respectability eg in relation to language schools in West Belfast. It can also be used to enhance their international image through comparisons with other minority languages and suggestions that HMG is repressing the use of the language.

6. It is largely because Sinn Fein in particular exploits the language issue in this way that many in the majority community are suspicious of proposals to encourage greater use of Irish, which they see as a symbol of republicanism. The SDLP's policy, which asks for bilingualism, is more extreme than the proposals which the Irish Government have put to us.

7. Against this background, the Government's general approach to the Irish language has been as follows:

- (a) we recognise and respect the special importance of the Irish language to a number of people in Northern Ireland, and, where practicable, respond to demand for the use and encouragement of the Irish language (eg in schools and cultural events);
- (b) everyone in Northern Ireland speaks English and only a tiny minority use, or wish to use, the Irish language. This places constraints on what can

sensibly or practically be done within available resources and we do not support the development of a bilingual society;

- (c) within these constraints, we shall seek to remove obstacles to the development and use of the language;
- (d) we are willing to support legitimate interest in the language, thus demonstrating that we take seriously the concerns of the minority community over their 'language rights'. But we want to avoid excessive measures that are out of proportion to the minority interest, and that would be divisive and would politicise the issue further.

8. In dealing with specific language issues, the Government's objectives might be:

- (a) to respond positively, where practicable and consistent with other policies, to issues raised in the Intergovernmental Conference;
- (b) so far as possible, to defuse the political issues posed by the Irish language;
- (c) to respond to the demand in the nationalist community for the use of Irish, bearing in mind the resource and practical constraints as well as the need to keep broadly in step with the Government's policies in Scotland and Wales;
- (d) to undermine issues which Sinn Fein/PIRA are able to exploit.

Street Names

9. Section 19(4) of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (NI) 1949 prevents district

councils from erecting street-signs in languages other than English. The freedom to erect Irish language street-signs is a long-standing request of the SDLP, the Irish government and Irish language interest groups. The position remains as set out by my predecessor in her submission of 9 January (extract at Annex A), on which no formal decision has been recorded. The recommendation then was that the Secretary of State should expose to the Irish the divisiveness and practical difficulties entailed in 'street polls'; but, propose, instead to amend the 1949 Act to permit dual language street names, leaving local residents and District Councils to work out a modus vivendi. If it is now decided to accept that recommendation, we could perhaps tell the Irish of our decision in principle, but defer an announcement until a time of our own choosing. We could then either announce a decision to bring forward a draft Order in Council, subject to the normal consultative procedures; or we could now set to work on the preparation of a draft Order (which would probably take several months) and then publish a Proposal. The balance of advantage depends largely on our assessment of the political sensitivities, which apply also, but perhaps to a lesser extent, to other language proposals.

Place Name - Gazetteer and Bilingual Map

10. A substantial amount of work has been done on this subject, under DOE auspices. A gazetteer of about 700 English/Irish place names, validated by Queen's University, could be published, if Ministers so decided, in three to four weeks. It would include only those names where history offers a genuine Irish version, ie "artificial" Irish versions of names such as Crawfordsburn would not be included. In addition, the DOE have now funded a 5-year research project (at an annual cost of £100,000) into the historical origins of a greater number of Irish place names. Preparatory work has been undertaken on an English/Irish bilingual map, reflecting the gazetteer. The Irish name would appear first, with the English name in brackets. Where there is no known 'genuine' Irish version of a

name, then the English version only would appear. It would take about four months to bring the map to publication stage. Map and gazetteer should logically be published together (although separate publication might be possible). The total^{cost} of publishing the gazetteer and map ~~cost~~ should not exceed £20,000.

11. The question is whether we should now proceed to publication of (both) the gazetteer and the map (and indicate to the Irish that we shall be doing so). Earlier this year, the Secretary of State queried whether publication of the map by the Ordnance Survey would not suggest that Irish place names had been given official status. In response, we confirmed legal advice that the printing of Irish names on such a map (whether or not published by the Ordnance Survey) would not give a person the right to insist that official record should bear the Irish version of a place name. However, there is ~~no~~ doubt that ~~such~~ a publication ~~might~~^{and} encourage the argument that Irish place names should be acceptable to the authorities. One solution would be to publish a form of 'disclaimer' on the map and gazetteer, making clear that Irish place names were not officially recognised. (In effect, we would be saying that we had published these documents in response to public interest in the Irish language, not as a signal of any change of policy.) Alternatively, we could, as RI Departments have agreed, move gradually to a policy of accepting both Irish and English place names on official documents, although that policy would have considerable implications, not least in resource costs (see earlier advice on this subject reproduced at Annex B). Previously, Ministers have taken the position that we would review policy once the gazetteer and map were ready. In effect, we have now reached that position. ~~However,~~ There could be a strong argument for publishing the map and gazetteer now, even if we were not prepared (gradually) to change existing policy on place names. The Secretary of State might like to see the gazetteer ~~now~~ and consider it alongside further advice on the form that a 'disclaimer' might take and the implications of adjusting current policy. He may, however, now wish to agree in principle that we should proceed to publication, and be prepared to advise the Irish accordingly.

The Numbers of Irish speakers

12. The Irish have welcomed the Government's decision to include questions on use of and interest in Irish in the 1987 Continuous Household Survey. The Survey is now under way. Trends should be known later this month, although not Province-wide. We shall arrange for further advice to Ministers. The final analysis should be available in February/March 1988. The Government has previously reserved its position on the inclusion of a question on Irish in the 1991 Census. It still seems sensible to await the result of the CHS research before making a decision. There would seem to be no reason why we should not make available to the Irish the preliminary (and subsequent) findings from the Household Survey.

Financial Support for Cultural Activities

13. The position is that the Arts Council has always been willing to consider support for Irish language related activities, provided that the activities proposed for funding meet the appropriate quality criteria. The Council does not regard itself as responsible for promoting the language per se. However, following discussions with Dr Mawhinney earlier this year, the real resources of the Arts Council have been increased in 1987/88, and within its ordinary criteria the Council has decided to provide additional support for Irish language publications and for the assistance and encouragement of writers in Irish. This may include support for a university writer-in-residence. The Arts Council also intends to support Gaelic drama in schools and to reinstate its collection and recording of traditional music. The total extra expenditure involved may be £25,000 in 1987/88. The Arts Council is independent of Government, and these decisions have been reached independently. The decisions do, however, go a long way towards doing what we hoped would be possible.

Other Issues

14. This submission has dealt with what appear to be the principal outstanding Irish language issues. There are, however, a number of other issues which the Irish have raised with us in the past and which they are likely to wish to discuss with us again. In particular, they wish to have a discussion with officials on education. A note by officials on Irish language education is at Annex C. The Secretary of State may wish to consider whether, if the policy objectives suggested here are accepted, we should be seeking out other means of encouraging Irish language studies, involving modest financial support, and perhaps taking account of any Irish suggestions.

15. There are a number of other Irish language issues which come under the broad heading of "communication with Government". They include official recognition of Irish personal names, the use of Irish in official business and, of course, official acceptance of Irish place names. On personal names, we intend, as the Secretary of State has decided, to standardise practice in NI Departments and the NIO (less the prisons), but the RUC see difficulties about falling fully into line. NI Departments see difficulties about the regular acceptance of Irish as a medium of communication with member of the public who choose to write to us in Irish. We are preparing separate advice on these points.

Conclusions and Recommendations

16. The Secretary of State may wish to endorse the policy approach and objectives set out at paras 7 and 8. These provide a back-drop for consideration of specific language issues.

17. He may also wish to:

- (a) agree in principle to proceed with legislation on dual-language street signs (para 9) and the publication of a gazetteer and Ordnance Survey map;

- (b) if agreed, consider the nature of further action required on each;
- (c) be prepared to notify the Irish at any IC meeting in the near future of the position on these matters, and on research on the numbers of Irish speakers (para 12) and on financial support for Irish language cultural activities;
- (d) note that further advice will be submitted on the use of Irish in communications with Government.

18. Whether or not the subject of the Irish language is raised at an IC meeting in the near future, it will be desirable to have a further discussion with Irish officials in the near future and it would no doubt be helpful to take account of Ministerial views on this submission.

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