

E. R.



PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

RBS/410/86

cc. PS/PUS (B&L) 18/x
1. PS/Mr Bloomfield
NI Perm Secs
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Mr M Elliott
Miss F Elliott
Mr Bell
Mr McConnell
Mr S Hewitt

Mr Chesterton

"IRISHNESS"

1. This minute explores further the idea discussed at the Secretary of State's meeting of 15 October on Irish language issues of trying to shift the debate towards promotion of "Irishness". It goes on to suggest a possible way forward and the line which the Secretary of State might take at the next meeting of the Conference.
2. It is by no means clear what we mean by "the promotion of Irishness" and I have sought to interpret it as - encouraging understanding of, and interest in, the richness and diversity of Ulster's cultural heritage.
3. NI Departments are already very active in this area. Without attempting to produce a comprehensive list of activities, one might highlight the work of the Museums (especially the Folk and Transport Museum), the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Branch of DOE, the Public Record Office, the Arts Council, the 2 Universities (in particular the Institute of Irish Studies and the Department of Celtic Studies at QUB) and the extensive development of the relevant subjects in schools.

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4. There is, of course, always scope to do more provided resources can be provided. For example, funds might be allocated to help District Councils establish local museums; the Arts Council may be able to expand its activities in appropriate areas; we might do more to encourage local history societies; we could extend the educational work of the Public Record Office.
5. Such modest steps would be worthwhile in their own right and perhaps help to generate goodwill. However, they do not - I think - address the heart of the problem or constitute an adequate response to the points being pressed by the Irish (and the SDLP) in relation to the Irish language.
6. The heart of the problem is, of course, the existence of two traditions in NI, the "identity" of the Ulster people, and the grave risk that measures in favour of one or other tradition will merely deepen divisions.
7. On further reflection, I have become more convinced that we should not fudge our position on Irish language issues and that we must be forthright in rejecting the basic approach which the Irish and SDLP are proposing.
8. To be clear, the Irish are advocating a policy of positive encouragement of the Irish language. The SDLP go much further and their policy document sees "the Irish language as a means of unifying the people of this country, both nationalists and unionists, and not as a means of cultivating division among them". The party is pressing for equality of status for the Irish language and aims "to ensure that all pupils, both pupils in state schools and pupils in voluntary schools, have an opportunity to study the Irish language during their time at school". There is, for example, a specific proposal to provide, within 10 years, every pupil in primary education with one Irish lesson per day.
9. All this is disturbingly distant from reality and the gap between the Irish/SDLP view and that of HMG is very great indeed. I am sure that our response should be that we are firmly opposed to bilingualism, but we are willing to remove certain barriers to the use of Irish and to consider the scope for a positive

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response to real demand for action in a limited number of areas.

10. However, all the discussion to date has revealed how difficult it will be to take action in respect of the use of Irish in street names, personal names and placenames.
11. I am quite sure that a cautious response will not please the Irish or the SDLP. (I refrain from including Sinn Fein who have largely succeeded in highjacking the Irish language issue). The Irish will suspect that this is another example of the UK side going slow on implementation of the Agreement, or of the English failing to understand and respect the importance of Ireland's cultural heritage, or of a unionist-dominated civil service stopping desirable changes. They will believe that our unwillingness to act more forcefully is because of fear of unionist reactions.
12. I would suggest that all these difficulties arise in part because we will not be addressing the central issue of the existence of the two traditions, the need to respect both, and to develop the things which unite rather than those which divide.
13. I have, therefore, come round to the view that we need to find some way of standing back from the issues in order to take a more rounded way of the best way forward. Given all the political pressures which are involved, I think that we should now give serious consideration to appointing a small committee/commission of people of eminence drawn from the two traditions which would be asked to advise on "how the cultural heritage of the different traditions in NI can be respected and fostered in a way which unites rather than divides the people of the area". I am sure that we could find the right individuals to serve on such a committee.
14. I recognise that the immediate reaction of colleagues to this suggestion will be hostile - it will be seen as shelving the problem; at the end of the day, Ministers have to decide these matters; we don't want a lengthy, academic discourse; we

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could find ourselves faced with unpalatable recommendations; we are never going to be able to satisfy the Irish language enthusiasts; unionists would interpret the establishment of a committee as part of the Anglo-Irish plot, etc etc.

15. On the other hand, this is a profoundly difficult problem; a group of distinguished Ulster people is more likely to be able to point the right way forward and to carry creditability; Ministers might welcome access to new advice on the problem which could provide the framework within which to make decisions on Irish language and other issues; the Irish might well see it as a very positive step.
16. If we went down the path which I am suggesting, the Secretary of State might say at the next meeting of the Conference -
 - we have been considering very carefully the views expressed by the Irish and the SDLP about the Irish language;
 - we believe that this is a very difficult issue which is part of the more complex problem of the different traditions in NI;
 - we do not think it is wise to make strenuous efforts to encourage greater use of the Irish language; we need better evidence that the demand really exists; we believe that it would be a very divisive policy;
 - we propose, however, to remove some barriers to the use of the Irish in respect of street names, personal names and placenames;
 - we also propose to establish a commission to advise on the broad issue of how the cultural heritage of the different traditions can be respected in a way which unites rather than divides the people of NI and we would welcome the views of the Irish on possible members.

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17. Mr Bloomfield, with whom I have discussed this possible approach, has suggested that a PCC discussion on 27 November might be helpful.

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R B SPENCE

18 November 1986

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