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PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (L&B)

cc PS/Ministers (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
✓ PS/Mr Bloomfield 15/1
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Mr A W Stephens
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Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott
Mr Gilliland
Mr Palmer
Mr Spence
Mr Bell
Mr Blackwell
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Mr McConnell



THE POSITION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Introduction

1. The purpose of this submission, which has been endorsed by PCC, is to bring the Secretary of State up to date with the issues under discussion, on which work has been proceeding in accordance with the outcome of the Ministerial meeting on 15 October, and to seek his guidance on the line to be taken at the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference, when this subject will be on the agenda. The Secretary of State will be receiving separately advice on the general line to take at what could possibly be the last meeting before a General Election in the Republic.

Personal names

2. Discussions have taken place with the RUC and the Army about the implications for them of the Secretary of State's decision that the NIO and NI Departments should accept Irish personal names as uniform practice; at present it varies within and among Departments. They are to give a view at SCM on 14 January on whether they could operate satisfactorily a system whereby the security forces would accept the Irish version of a persons name

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provided he was prepared to spell it out for the soldier or policeman, and give the English version; (this would enable records to be amended to include Irish as well as English versions). This would be no different from the present UK-wide police practice of recording aliases or "also known as" in criminal records. (First indications are that the Army would be prepared to do so.) Once the security forces' reaction is known, Central Secretariat will instruct Departments that since individuals are legally entitled to use Irish personal names, these should be accepted.

3. At the Intergovernmental Conference the Secretary of State will be able to inform the Irish that steps are being taken to ensure that acceptance of Irish personal names is practised uniformly; and (at least) that the RUC and Army are looking carefully at the practical implications for them.

Place names

4. The production of an interim list (gazetteer) of about 700 English/Irish place names, validated by Queen's University, is virtually complete. It will include only names where history offers a genuine Irish version. Names such as Crawfordsburn, for example, will not be included artificially. (DOE have funded longer term research into the historical origins of a greater number.) DOE will shortly be asking Mr Needham to approve details of format and possible distribution of the gazetteer. Thereafter the Ordnance Survey could prepare a dual language map in two to three months. The total cost of those documents should not exceed £20,000 (Mr Needham's minute to the Secretary of State of 24 November). Legal advice is that the printing of Irish names on such a map will not confer any official status on those names. It would not give a person the right to insist that official records should bear the Irish version of a place name: although, given the Survey's role in determining (on grounds of custom, use and other factors) the correct name of a place, it will encourage him to argue that it should be acceptable to the authorities.

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5. The Secretary of State can point to this progress at the Intergovernmental Conference and might say that when the work is complete, he will consider whether any further steps on place names would be justified.

Street names

6. Despite his earlier view, transmitted to the Irish Government in June, that the residents of a defined district should be entitled if they so wished to have street names displayed in Irish as well as English (on dual language signs), the Secretary of State decided after discussion at the Ministerial meeting on 15 October to point out the divisive nature of the issue in Northern Ireland. Sectarian divisions in housing would be thrown into higher profile. It could also be interpreted as the triumph of the nationalist tradition over the unionist, even though in fact it would not remove any rights from unionists. The fact that street names are allowed only in English (unlike in England, Scotland and Wales) is seen by the SDLP and the Irish Government as a unnecessary and discriminatory restriction on nationalist aspirations.

7. The above reactions have to be considered against the fact that the commitment in the Anglo-Irish Agreement to recognise and respect the identities of the two communities will sometimes mean that the Government will have to pursue a policy which one community will dislike. This will be divisive in the short term. But in the longer term the hope is that policies of equal recognition will bring both communities together on the basis of mutual recognition and acceptance of each other's rights. Against this background, there are three options open to the Secretary of State:

- (i) To amend Section 19(4) of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949 which permits street names to be designated in English only

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to enable them also to be designated in both English and Irish: this would bring the law more into line with legislation in the rest of Great Britain. The disadvantages would be that unionist dominated councils would be unlikely to respond to nationalist requests to erect dual language names; nationalist district councils might erect the latter in unionist areas; and Irish names already erected by Sinn Fein and other groups would remain illegal;

(ii) To repeal Section 19 of the 1949 Act and to devise a scheme whereby a district council would be required to erect dual language street names if a majority of residents of a street signify that wish: practical difficulties would arise in respect of the definition of streets; the percentage of residents required to trigger a ballot and to decide whether a dual language name should be erected; the form of ballot (postal or otherwise); and the cost of erecting dual language names (Mr Needham's minute of 24 November's broad brush estimate is that the total for ballot (£800,000) and names (£1,970,000) might be £2,770,000);

(iii) Despite the views of the Irish Government and the SDLP, to do nothing.

8. Ministers did not agree on 15 October what would be the best course to adopt. In the light of Ministers' views, the new information provided by Mr Needham, and the general desirability enshrined in the Agreement of seeking to resolve differences of view with the Irish Government, PCC recommends that the Secretary of State might expose to the Irish problems involved in option (ii) and suggest that option (i) might provide the best way forward.

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9. The Continuous Household Survey, to be launched in January 1987, includes questions about interest in and knowledge of the Irish language. Trends should be known in July, although not Province wide. The final analysis should be available in February/March 1988. The Secretary of State might wish to inform the Irish that this work is in hand.

Irish Language Cultural Activities

10. There have been discussions between DENI officials and the Arts Council for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State and other experts, on the scope for showing greater respect and support for the Irish language. (The variety and extent of their current work was recognised.) The Secretary of State has invited Dr Mawhinney to discuss with the Chairman and Director of the Arts Council how their activities can be extended to meet this objective.

11. At the Intergovernmental Conference, the Secretary of State may wish to inform the Irish Government, as he indicated in June, that he is exploring additional opportunities to support Irish language cultural activities.

Summary and Conclusion

12. The Secretary of State is invited to note the work described above and to signify whether he is content to inform the Irish Government about it in the following terms.

- (i) The NIO and NI Departments will be instructed that Irish personal names must be accepted (at present, practice varies); the RUC and Army are considering carefully whether they can do likewise (paragraph 3).

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- (ii) An interim list of the English/Irish version of place names in Northern Ireland is almost complete. (Longer term research on the historical derivation of a larger number is being funded by DOE.) On the basis of the former, the Ordnance Survey is producing a dual language map which should be ready in two or three months. We will then consider if any further steps on place names would be justified (paragraph 5).
- (iii) The issue of dual language street names evokes strong reactions among both unionists and nationalists. Deeper consideration of a scheme to require District Councils to erect dual language signs has thrown up a number of difficulties. Amendment of Section 19(4) of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949 which prohibits the painting of street names other than in English, to permit dual language names, but leaving local residents and District Councils to work out a modus vivendi, might offer the best way forward (paras. 7 and 8).
- (iv) The Continuous Household Survey to be launched in January will as planned include questions about interest in and knowledge of the Irish language (paragraph 9).
- (v) Preliminary discussions with the Arts Council for Northern Ireland and other experts have taken place to decide the scope for increased support for Irish language cultural activities; Dr Mawhinney will shortly be taking this further with the Arts Council (paragraph 11).

Frances Elliott

MISS D F E ELLIOTT

CPL

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