

To JANET LOWE SIC
FROM CAROL MOORE CENT. SEC. 22/7/86.

2 Pages



Central Secretariat
Stormont Castle
Belfast BT4 3ST
Tel. Belfast 63011

Mr S de Napier
Northern Ireland Representative
The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages
Quoilequay House
Quoile
DOWNPATRICK
BT 30

1 May 1986

Dear Mr de Napier

Thank you for your letter of 12 March enclosing a copy of the NI Sub Committee's proposals for securing equality of rights for Irish speaking people in Northern Ireland.

Let me say at the outset that the Government recognises that the Irish language is an important aspect of Irish cultural heritage and its policy towards the Irish language continues to be based on the need to respect and recognise this. Article 5(a) of the Anglo-Irish Agreement established the Inter-Governmental Conference as the vehicle to consider measures to accommodate the rights and identities of the two traditions in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government have conveyed views and proposals on the Irish language in NI to it. These are currently being considered and the views of the Sub-Committee will also be taken into account. I do not therefore want to pre-empt the outcome of these discussions but would like to comment on the progress made in some of the areas you raise.

The Government is currently considering various methods of collecting meaningful information about the use of the Irish language in NI. The inclusion of a question in the 1991 Census is one option but there are others possibly more appropriate and it is important not to lose sight of the fundamentals ie, what information is required and what is it to be used for. As the proposals themselves indicate, those answering an Irish language questions would have very varying degrees of competence in and make very different use of the language. It is obviously important to avoid ambiguity or subjectivity as the purpose of the census is to collect accurate information on which to base essential service provision. The inclusion of the question in the 1981 Census in Wales and Scotland was to collect information for education planning for those communities which conduct everyday life in Welsh and Gaelic respectively. The position in NI is different as English is almost without exception everyone's first language.

The practice of using English in the day to day administration of Government Departments, the Courts and in the RUC stems from the need to avoid unnecessary delay, complication and possible misunderstanding since English is customarily used by over 99% of the population and understood by all. Translation facilities are available for those who use languages other than English of necessity rather than preference.

Government support for cultural activities in Northern Ireland is channelled through the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, who have responsibility to disburse the resources available to them, according to their assessment of the needs and priorities of the various



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activities they support. There are many demands on their limited resources but the Council has promoted literature in Irish and supports traditional music.

The question of the use of the Irish language in the field of mass communication is primarily a matter for the broadcasting organisations concerned, however I am sure you will be aware that there is an increasing amount of Irish language broadcasting aimed both at schools and a general audience.

The school curriculum in Northern Ireland is not dictated or controlled by the Government; it is essentially a matter for the schools themselves. In this respect the teaching of Irish is treated no differently from other areas of the curriculum in terms of resources which might be made available. Today more than 20,000 pupils in around 120 of Northern Ireland's secondary schools study Irish and it is likely to develop further in primary schools.

I hope that this information will help to clarify the Government's thinking on the use of Irish in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

TREVOR PEARSON

Hidden Copies

PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Green
Miss Elliott
Mr Hamilton, DOE
Dr Harbison
Mr Bell
Mr McConnell
Mr Blackwell
Mr R McMurray
Mr Carson