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Your reference

Our reference

Date

21 May 1990

Dec. Com. 2.2.88
31/5
1) cc R Hall, CPL
2) M Barchwell
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Ebb 30/5

THE DEATH OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE?

1. I have been meaning for some time to send you an assessment of the state of the Irish language - presumptuous though this is from a non-Irish speaker - and the consequences if any for relations within these islands. My task has been made simpler by a recently published book with the same title as this letter (but without my cautionary question-mark), which examines each separate community where Irish is supposedly spoken.

2. The Irish Government have for years invested considerable resources in attempting to preserve the Irish language. In the Gaeltacht, the (formally) Irish-speaking areas;

- Full
- (i) children proficient in Irish, to a supposedly native level, are given an annual grant of £10 (the "deontas")
 - (ii) housing grants of substantially larger amounts than outside the Gaeltacht are tied to the recipient's ability in Irish or one of his children receiving the deontas;

1. Mr. Mc Buckler
2. Miss Annan 6/6

To see + file please. (iii)

A depressing story for the language enthusiasts - if this analysis is accurate. The task for NI must be even more difficult.

JW/6.

(iii) Udaras na Gaeltachta makes substantial grants available to companies in the Gaeltacht which employ a substantial proportion of Irish-speakers and where Irish is allegedly the language normally used in the workplace. It currently supports about 5,600 jobs; nearly one for every ten Irish-speakers recorded by the 1986 census in the Gaeltacht. A Dublin friend of mine once worked in one of these firms. Everyone spoke Irish until they were sure he was not a Government spy. After that he did not hear the language again;

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- (iv) although it is not restricted to the Gaeltacht, it is particularly relevant here that all farmers owning below a certain acreage receive unemployment benefit;
- (v) there is a separate Irish-language radio-station, Radio na Gaeltachta, and the Minister for Communications has just ordered RTE to start producing two hours of Irish language television programmes daily. RTE say they do not have enough Irish-speakers to do this.

3. The proportion of people throughout the Republic who record themselves as speaking Irish (a subjective and sometimes wishful self-assessment) rose steadily if slowly from 27.2% in 1961 to 31.6% in 1981. The census of 1986 recorded a slight drop, to 31.1%. But the proportion of 3-4 years olds so recorded - a figure which includes a number who have started learning it at school and is particularly prone to inflation by fond parental imaginings - has been dropping steadily, from 5.9% in 1961 to 4.2% in 1986.

4. More significant is the drop in the proportion of self-recorded Irish-speakers in the Gaeltacht, which has fallen from 82.9% in 1971 to 74.0% (58,451 people) in 1986. That may not seem a terminal decline. But the proportion of 3-4 year olds in the Gaeltacht enumerated as Irish-speaking was only 43.5%, clearly demonstrating that Irish has ceased to be a language used in the home - not even as a second language - for a majority within the Gaeltacht. In the Meath and Mayo Gaeltachts barely one in five children of this age were claimed to speak Irish. (And these figures are particularly prone to exaggeration within the Gaeltacht, since many of those completing the census will not trust in the confidentiality of the exercise and may derive considerable financial benefit from their supposed use of the language),

5. Map 1 enclosed shows the state of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht according to the 1981 census (the latest in which detailed figures broken down by electoral districts are available). But it exaggerates the health of the Gaeltacht; vast areas of uninhabited country are included within Gaeltacht boundaries to give the impression of cohesion and large extent. Map 2, from the data in Hindley's "Death of the Irish Language" which analyse deontas-returns as well as census returns, gives a different picture; even in the apparently large and cohesive Gaeltacht areas shown in Map 1, are in fact a series of small and disparate communities strung out along roads between English-speaking centres; and even in the Arran Islands there are areas where English has become the main language of everyday use.

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6. It is difficult to conclude from this anything other than that the language is on the verge of extinction as one of everyday use, except for sufficient phrases to use in front of tourists to emphasise the uniqueness of the Gaeltacht. (And with a degree of resentment at one's dependency on the language). Census figures may for a time obscure this reality; as fewer and fewer real speakers of the language are heard, the standard by which people assess whether they can speak Irish is likely to drop and the number so assessing themselves may rise. Hindley makes the fair point that wishful thinking and self-delusions are in fact one of the main weapons the language has for survival; but it does seem likely that on this issue, in ten or twenty years' time, even the Irish capacity for self-deception will be exhausted.

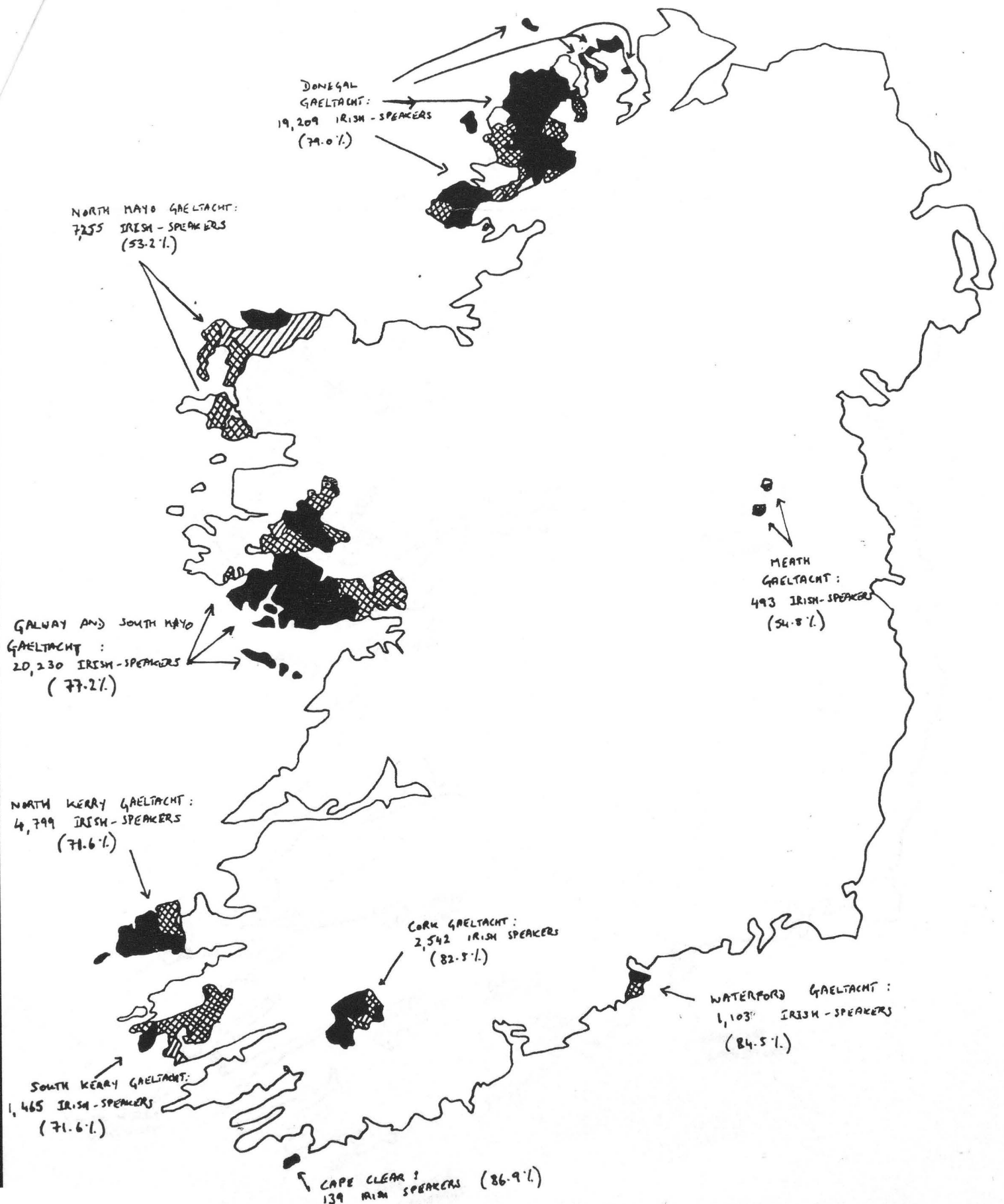
7. Does it matter (except in the sense that the death of a language is always sad)? I suspect it does. The language as a badge of separateness has always been important to the Irish; and the desire to save it was a significant element in separation. The fact that the Irish people did not really care enough to save it will be seen as a national humiliation; and the consoling thesis will be used that the British really put the language into the ward for the terminally ill. Enthusiasts are likely to make one last supreme effort to revive it outside the Gaeltacht, while others will increasingly strive to end the compulsory teaching of Irish and the translation into Irish of government documents as a waste of resource; the tensions in this argument will be nationalistic ones and are likely to express themselves in anti-British sentiment; grief at deaths, of languages as of people, is easier to bear if an outsider can be blamed. Brit-bashing is unlikely to go out of fashion here for a while yet.

W M L Dickinson
W M L Dickinson

cc; Dr C Sperling, Research Dept, FCO
E C Hallett Esq, SIL, NIO(L)

MAP 1: CENSUS 1981, 3-YEAR OLDS AND OVER

80% CLAIMING TO SPEAK IRISH
 75% CLAIMING TO SPEAK IRISH
 5-55% CLAIMING TO SPEAK IRISH
 UNDER 45% CLAIMING TO SPEAK IRISH



MAP 2 : THE REAL STATE OF THE LANGUAGE ?

- ▲ PRIMARY IRISH-SPEAKING
- ▨ TRANSITIONAL : MORE IRISH THAN ENGLISH
- ▤ TRANSITIONAL : MORE ENGLISH THAN IRISH
- PRIMARILY ENGLISH SPEAKING
- OUTSIDE GAELTACHT OR UNINHABITED.

