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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

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BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

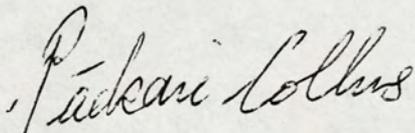
28 January, 1988.

Mr. Tim Corcoran,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Dear Tim,

I enclose a copy of the report done by Pat Scullion of the meeting on the Irish Language held here on Tuesday, 26 January 1988.

Yours sincerely,



Padraic Collins

**Meeting to discuss the Irish Language in the
Educational System in Northern Ireland**

Venue: Maryfield

Date: 26 January 1988

Participants

Irish side

P. Collins, Secretariat
P. Scullion, Secretariat

British Side

R. Spence, Central Secretariat
P. Holmes, D.E.N.I.
H. McRory, D.E.N.I. (Inspectorate)
R. Masefield, Secretariat
V. Steele, Secretariat

1. It was agreed at the meeting held in the Secretariat on 23 September 1987 to discuss the Irish language in Northern Ireland that officials from the Department of Education (D.E.N.I.), including a representative from the the schools inspectorate division, would brief the Irish side on the Irish language in the educational system and outline the supports available for Irish language teaching.
2. At Mr. Collins' request the British side agreed, firstly, to provide a very brief overview of how the Irish language is dealt with in Northern Ireland at Primary and Secondary level and then to proceed with any questions which might arise from our side.

PRIMARY LEVEL

3. Mr. McRory explained that the treatment of Irish is comparable to all other subjects in that it is included in the curriculum at the discretion of each school. The teaching of Irish is, to all intents and purposes, confined to the maintained sector (that is, Catholic schools). Given that Primary schools are not obliged to report on the numbers studying Irish, it is not possible to quantify the number of children at Primary school level who learn Irish. From his experience as an inspector (he is the only inspector of Irish in Northern Ireland) he is happy that there is a good deal of Irish taught in Northern Ireland and also that it is on the increase. He did not wish the statement to imply, however, that the teaching of Irish is in a healthy state. A major problem is the lack of qualified teachers

because, in general, in the maintained sector, a school will provide classes in Irish at a level commensurate to the expertise of the teachers in the particular school. Some schools provide classes in Irish as early as the P1 stage, while others make a conscious decision to wait until the P5 stage with the emphasis on students taking Irish as a subject at secondary level. Some schools teach the language in the context of the general study of Irish culture, history and music. He referred to the concept of "cluster groups" which had been set up in Omagh, Strabane, Armagh, Newry and some other places to promote the teaching of Irish as a language at Primary level. The groups were assisted by trained teachers. Unfortunately, the groups were unable to sustain the initial interest and now only the Newry group remains.

SECONDARY LEVEL

4. Mr. McRory pointed out that the teaching of Irish at the Secondary level is confined to the maintained sector. Statistics indicate that while the demand is relatively strong in the 1st to 3rd years of Secondary education it falls off drastically in the 4th year. Out of a total of approx. 25,000 pupils who study Irish in the 125 maintained schools approximately 21,000 are in the 1st to 3rd year bracket (i.e. 7,500, 7,500, & 6,000). The figure drops to 1586 for the 4th year and this is attributed mainly to subject option groups which become available from 4th year onwards. The option groups include all languages and there is therefore no bias against Irish. It is simply that the range of subjects to be taken drops and it is inevitable that some subjects lose out. Statistics indicate that in 1985 1682 pupils took Irish as a subject for GCE "O" level examinations while only 309 took it for GCE "A" level examinations. While the number taking "O" level Irish has increased over the last 3-4 years the numbers are down on the figures for 10 years ago. He attributed this to the fact that in many Christian Brothers schools Irish was compulsory then whereas it is not a compulsory subject now. Irish is listed second to French as the most popular modern language studied in Secondary schools in Northern Ireland. It has suffered the same fate as other modern languages which are dropped from 4th year onwards in favour of the sciences. In girls schools it is not uncommon for students studying for "A" levels to drop languages in favour of, for example, commercial courses.

He then referred to the 11-16 yr. curriculum programme initiated by D.E.N.I. as part of their review of the national curriculum. The programme enables a

school to look globally at its policies, aims and objectives in an effort to identify where these are or are not being implemented in practice. He instanced by way of example a school whose policy is to be wholly Irish and Catholic but which is not teaching Irish. The programme therefore enables a school to get a general overview of whether or not policy is implemented in practice. He explained that Irish is at the top of the list of modern languages studied in Northern Ireland's maintained schools. He attributed this to such factors as the desire to speak the native language and the fact that it is more natural to the ear than French. The numbers taking "A" level Irish averages at around 300 per year with the girls outnumbering the boys. He attributed this to the fact that the girls schools tend to be less science orientated and that science is one of those subject chosen instead of languages at the 4th year stage.

TEACHER TRAINING

5. Mr. McRory said that Primary level Teacher Training for Catholics is provided by St. Mary's College of Education. Teachers have the option of taking the Irish language as a subject but in practice only a small number do so. However, if a teacher does not select Irish as a specialist subject he/she does not receive accreditation for it. This creates obvious difficulties for teachers when they seek external accreditation for their subjects. The matter is under examination at the moment by C.A.T.E., a body which accredits courses in Training Colleges, and which operates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The idea is that a teacher who does not choose a language as a specialist subject but who studies it for a number of years should get official credit for that subject. At Primary School level a teacher with "A" level Irish can teach Irish to the extent to which he/she feels equipped to do so.

In Service Training for Teachers

6. Mr. McRory said that the interest which these courses generated 6-7 yrs ago has not been sustained. The numbers of teachers seconded to one-year fulltime courses dropped from 100 to 75 between 1984 and 1987. Since the introduction of the general Guidelines for Primary Education most of the money available in this area is being channelled towards the teaching of English.

However, a need for in-service training courses for teachers of Irish may emerge with the eventual introduction of the Primary school guidelines for a second language. These guidelines were due for publication last year. In this respect he said that he was involved in the preparation of a discussion document which examined the need to teach a second language at Primary School level having regard to staff and resource implications, consequential in-service training implications and the general implications for the school. It emerged that if agreement is reached on the need to teach a second language a separate Guidance document should issue in respect of each language. A final decision in this area is expected within the current school year. Mr. Holmes said that during a survey of Primary Schools carried out in the 1980/81 year the Inspectorate examined the Primary sector in an effort to identify weaknesses in the system. The Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development (N.I.C.E.D.) was asked to prepare guidelines on a subject basis. The first document was in effect a general statement about Primary education and thinking was constant with broad subject levels. It confined itself to the two general themes of literacy and numeracy. A second document sought to broaden the perspective and it looked at specific subjects such as history, environmental studies, music, science, art, and later physical education and a second language. Each document is significant in its own right and this made it difficult for schools to grasp their respective importance. Schools can in effect focus and develop a specific area and thus have funds channelled in that way. This was considered to be a cohesive approach in that it enables schools to bring in expertise in the teaching of, for instance, minority languages. The general guidelines have one drawback in that they take the line that the teaching of a second language at Primary school level shall not be normal practice for schools. This line of argument was also evinced in the Clair Burstell National Foundation document which dealt, among other things, with the need to acquire a second language. That document concluded that as there were insufficient numbers of teachers with the expertise necessary to teach a second language at Primary school level the concept was better left alone. This was not to say that it was wrong to consider teaching a second language. It merely referred to the factual position vis a vis the availability of Primary school teachers with the necessary qualifications.

GAEL-LINN DOCUMENT

7. Mr. Collins referred to Gael Linn's paper entitled "Irish in the Northern Education System - A Plan for Development" and asked for their reaction to the statement that the introduction of the 11 Plus examination had deteriorated the position of Irish at primary level and that there were statistics available to illustrate the deterioration. Mr. Holmes doubted that there was any statistical basis to back up this theory. Mr. McRory explained that the introduction of the 11 Plus had created a narrowing effect on primary level education in general which applied right through the curriculum and not just to Irish.

Mr. Collins asked if consideration had ever been given to the introduction of a course in Irish studies. He was referring specifically to Secondary level education and had in mind courses which would give a general view of Ireland's history, geography and cultural heritage. Mr. McRory said that he was in no doubt that some school principals would be in favour of such an approach but that he would prefer to lay the emphasis on a strong language content with the study of other related matters being of secondary importance. He had two reasons for taking that stance: (1) the teaching of the Irish language in the context of a general Irish Studies course could result in the eventual diminution of the language element and (2) it is essential to begin with a strong language content if a student is to understand and appreciate items such as the study of Irish place names etc. He was not convinced of the merit of a course in Irish Studies. Mr. Holmes argued that the Irish studies output from the BBC has been of immense benefit to schools. Three series had been produced to date and they were working on a fourth ("A" level) series.

8. Mr. Collins enquired about the availability of texts in the Irish language. He was particularly interested in whether they were still relying on publications from the South. Mr. McRory replied that the availability of suitable material had always been a problem here, the main reason being that publication of such texts is not commercially viable. There is a need to convince at least one publisher to assist them knowing that he will not make a profit. This is a difficult task although Mr. Holmes seemed to suggest

that a notable British publisher was looking positively at their dilemma. They were aware of the need to have authentic texts because of the percentage marks awarded at examinations for speaking, listening, reading and writing the language. He explained that DENI provide refresher courses in Irish and French at St. Marys for up to a maximum of 30 teachers each year. The course runs for fourteen weeks and about 20 teachers take advantage of the opportunity to brush up on their Irish each year. Mr. McRory added that about 2 years ago a group of teachers undertaking one of these refresher courses produced an immense amount of material on the four modes of speaking, listening, reading and writing Irish and that agreement has now been reached with DENI to fund publicaion of this material. At the moment two teachers have been seconded to proof read the material. In addition, a group of teachers are in Donegal making tape recordings of the spoken language. It is hoped that the composite works should be available by the end of this school year. He pointed out for information that schools/groups can receive assistance to publish from the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development (N.I.C.E.D.). He also commented that texts with appropriate tapes available in the South, (he instanced "Mise agus Tusa") could have been very useful in the North if the tape had been adapted to take account of the Ulster dialect.

LUNCH

There was a discussion over lunch on the general question of the use of the Irish language in Northern Ireland and on further issues contained in the Gael Linn document.

9. Mr. Spence referred to the forthcoming Conference and to what might be covered, on the Irish language issue, in the Joint Communique. A trailer on this issue had been included in the Communique issued after the October '87 Conference. He mentioned the possibility of movement in relation to the street names issue. Mr. Collins said that the Irish side would be pressing for positive action on the 1949 Act and on the use of street names in Irish. Mr. Holmes returned to a point made at the meeting on 23 September that the Ards Council, which had received a cash injection, was still not inundated with projects or requests for financial assistance (specifically in the area of literature) in relation to the Irish Language. He explained that the Council's annual budget is about £3.25 million but that after the deduction of salaries, running costs, maintaining the Opera and the Ulster

Orchestra the residue is down to under fl million. He said there was good productive work between the Arts Councils North and South even though the agency in our jurisdiction has suffered due to the present climate of economic cutbacks. These had resulted in a reduction in the number of Irish companys (The Abbey and Ballet company were given as examples) travelling North on tour.

X | Mr. Spence confirmed, although this was already known to us, that a question on the use and knowledge of the Irish language had been included in the 1987 Continuous Household Survey. He said that they should soon have some information from the result of the Survey.

Mr. Collins then turned to the suggestion that scholarships be made available to students to study Irish in the Donegal Gaeltacht to help them perfect their oral Irish techniques. Mr. McRory explained that DENI had embarked on a course of sending 11 yr olds to the Gaeltacht with their teachers for a two week period at the end of June, before the summer colleges commence, and that it was proving successful. Around 100 pupils and 8 teachers (ratio of 1:12) take part each year. Mr. Holmes pointed out that D.E.N.I. does provide funds for teachers, with virtually no set limit as to numbers, to go to the Gaeltacht. This is done under their programme of sponsorship for foreign languages. Seven teachers had been sent to France to study French under this programme. He emphasised, however, that it is a general language scheme as distinct from a specific Irish language scheme. Mr. Collins said that while nationalist teachers would obviously benefit from the scheme he was in no doubt that in the broader political context nationalists would have difficulty in accepting that Irish should be included in a scheme designed to promote the study of foreign languages. Political perception among nationalists is that Irish is their native language and should receive "favoured" treatment. There is an obvious need for measures of encouragement on for Irish so that the nationalist community feel that their language and traditions are accepted as part of the system in Northern Ireland. Mr. McRory and Mr. Holmes agreed that there was a need to update the Departmental circular relating to the scheme and that the word Foreign should be deleted. Mr. Collins stressed the necessity to be positive in relation to Irish language names and the necessity to publicise official encouragement for it.

Mr. Holmes said that they did not wish to be seen to be discriminating positively in relation to the Irish language. After all, he said, there is no inspector of Spanish or French which, coupled with the resources made available for Irish publications, gives the Irish language, in a sense, a special position in Northern Ireland. From their point of view, it is essential to ensure that the proper concerns for each subject are adequately focused upon and supported. Mr. McRory spoke positively of DENI's general approach and support for the Irish language which he said was given mainly in response to demand. There was, therefore, a need for more positive requests for support. Mr. Collins again stressed that it is essential, from a nationalist point of view, that DENI not only encourage the use of the Irish language but also that they publicise the fact where possible and not adopt a low profile "demand" orientated policy.

10. Mr. Collins then asked if DENI are involved in the provision of night classes in Irish for adults. He was referring here in particular to the situation pertaining in West Belfast where Sinn Fein provide these classes. Mr. Holmes explained that DENI provides funds for Irish classes for adults under their Continuing Education Programmes. The programmes are normally initiated in response to market demand. The University of Ulster, Queens University and the Workers Education Authority run what he referred to as "pure" Irish language courses for adults as well as some general and informal cultural classes and post graduate classes. He admitted that the work in this area, while being useful, is not dramatic. He referred to the question of accreditation and said that DENI are working towards a scheme whereby a one year course in Irish would be reckonable for external accreditation. They have resorted to funding pressure to gain the Institution's acceptance of certain courses in Irish as part of an "aggregated model" by offering additional funding to those Institutions which allow the course to form part of an "aggregated model".

Mr. Collins again referred to the problems which pertain in West Belfast where Sinn Fein has virtually hijacked the Irish language for its own political gain. He said that in the context of trying to alter the situation in West Belfast the provision of official professionally staffed Irish classes for adults is of major importance. There was an obvious need for the Department to provide more officially qualified teachers who would go into the area and set up classes in opposition to Sinn Fein. People would be attracted to professionally run classes especially if a proficiency

X certificate were offered. Mr. Holmes replied that there was a movement towards the establishment of College of Further Education centre in West Belfast, which with the assistance of professional teachers could identify the Irish language as one of its subjects. He agreed that there is a need for a structured system to offer the same service as that being provided by Sinn Fein and that the problem needed to be tackled in an imaginative way. Mr. McRory agreed that there is a need for a structured system to oppose and ultimately defeat Sinn Fein. He instanced, as an example of such a structured institution, the Bunscoil in West Belfast which has stood aloof and has thus avoided infiltration by Sinn Fein.

Mr. Collins said that in relation to the recently published Gael-Linn document on Irish in Northern Ireland, we would like the people here who make the day to day decisions to meet them and discuss their proposals. Mr. McRory said that they could genuinely reply that there was action up to a point in most of the areas outlined in the document. Mr. Holmes said they would be happy to do so.

11. Mr. Holmes turned to the proposal that the use of language teaching advisers be extended to cover the Irish language. He said that they had two types of advisers in their system viz

- (i) Board Advisers in the pure sense, and
- (ii) a range of language teaching advisers .

The Board Advisers operate at both Primary and Secondary level and have an overview function over specific teachers. They are appointed on a sectoral rather than individual subject basis. The language teaching advisers are seconded from schools on a two to three year basis to visit schools and advise teachers.

12. Mr. Holmes asked whether the SDLP paper on the Irish language was prepared in response to demands from interested nationalists or in an effort to thwart the success of Sinn Fein in West Belfast. Mr. Collins said that while both elements were taken into account the paper was prepared predominantly in response to nationalist demands. However, it is a fact that in the wider political context the application of the SDLP proposals on the Irish language in West Belfast could conceivably gain 3-400 votes for the SDLP candidate there at the next general election with the obvious

consequential results. Mr. Spence said that some nationalists saw the Irish language as a factor which could unite both sides but he believed that this was an unreal expectation which is just not on. It is a matter of fact that Unionists will never show any interest in the Irish language. Mr. Collins said that an imaginative approach could get over this hurdle.

13. Mr. Collins thanked all those present for attending. He said that he wished the British side to leave the meeting with the clear understanding that constitutional nationalists perceive the Irish language as an integral and legitimate part of their cultural heritage. It would be a fatal mistake to underestimate its symbolic value to the nationalist community. An encouraging attitude towards it at the official level would be another step in indicating to nationalists that their cultural heritage was respected and catered for.

P. Scullion

27 January 1988