

F.R.

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NI 115/566/01

*Handwritten signature/initials*

Mr Carvill - M

387 2668  
 26 FEB 1985  
 FILE L2

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RECEIVED  
 1807  
 25 FEB 1985  
 STORMONT HOUSE ANNEX

cc: Mr Brennan  
 Mr Chesterton  
 Mr Lyon  
 Mr Reeve - M  
 Mr Bickham

STREET SIGNS IN IRISH IN WEST BELFAST

I attach Mr Holt's letter of 31 January to RID. I would have minuted you earlier but I only saw this at the end of last week.

2. The immediate issue is what we should say to the Irish. We can hardly say less than Mr Hurd said in reply to Mr Hume's PQ on 19 December when Mr Hume asked, inter alia, if the Secretary of State would give consideration to bringing forward legislation to repeal section 19 of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 1949. In his reply, the Secretary of State said "The Government have no plans to change the legislation in question, but we are giving consideration to the issues raised by the hon Gentleman's question." A few days earlier, on 13 December, the Secretary of State had a meeting to discuss "The Irish Identity" at which Irish language and culture were discussed. As paragraph 13 of the record of that meeting records, "as part of the package, however, provision could be made to allow street names and road signs to be in Irish as well as in English. The Secretary of State did not think that inconsistency of practice across Northern Ireland was a strong reason against this proposal. A more difficult question would be how to handle the case where the population of, say, West Belfast wished to have Irish street names and the City Council was asked to incur expenditure on this. The arrangement might be that the Council was obliged to adopt dual-language signs where that was a majority wish within an electoral unit." Despite this discussion, no

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specific proposals for action were agreed and, as noted above, developments in this field were at that time seen in the context of a package. But I wonder whether this line is still sustainable and whether, in line with the answer to Mr Hume's PQ, the Government does not need to demonstrate that it is in fact giving active consideration to this and related issues. If we do want to give some encouragement, then the message back to the Irish, while cautious, might make it clear that we had the minority's concern on this point on board and were seriously looking at the 1949 legislation.

1. However, the tone of the reply to the Irish must self-evidently be consistent with what we are actually doing on related fronts. One problem about moving on street signs - and even this would be difficult - is that it might be difficult in practice to proceed in a piecemeal way. Has the time come for a fairly wide ranging study of what could actually be done to meet reasonable minority concerns over the status and use of the Irish language? This might well lead to some conclusions which would be unwelcome to the minority, eg that while dual street signs would be reasonable, measures comparable to the Welsh Language Act 1975, which gives parity of esteem and status to the minority language in public administration, including the proceedings of the courts, would not. Alternatively, it could be argued that because the issues in this field were so complex it was better to knock off the relatively easy ones so that at least the Government was showing some willingness to move. Section 19 of the 1949 Act could be amended by Order in Council - indeed that would be the natural vehicle. The advantage of this is that we would not need a Bill, but the disadvantage is that there would have to be a Proposal on which the Assembly would be consulted and there must be a substantial risk that the Assembly would be opposed to change, although I suspect that at least some unionists would be in favour (or would not wish to appear to be against).

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4. One problem with this kind of issue is that the time is "not right"; but will there ever be a right time? We cannot go on hinting that the Government is "giving consideration" to issues such as this when nothing in fact ever happens. Has the time come to propose to the Secretary of State that if we do not adopt a piecemeal approach it is very difficult to see how any changes, even modest and reasonable ones, can be made in, as they say, the foreseeable future? At least street signs, as opposed to, say, the "I" voters problem, can be dealt with by Order in Council.

5. It would be helpful to have advice in the next day or so on what we should say to the Irish as our reply is now overdue.

*N.C. Abbott*

N C ABBOTT

25 February 1985

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C. D. Holt, Jilly Hill  
P. Coulson / 11-8  
Sentinel for advice  
D Dewberry

Mr D Dewberry	RECEIVED BY SECRETARY	Your reference	1/2
RID		Our reference	
		Date	31 January 1985

2.6/2  
 1) Mr. [unclear] to the  
 2) [unclear] to [unclear] CPO  
 3) Miss Campbell  
 Can you liaise  
 with CPO and draft  
 a reply to this?  
 DPH  
 6/2

Dear David,

**STREET SIGNS IN IRISH IN WEST BELFAST**

Another representation made to me by Daithi O'Ceallaigh concerns an application by a builder to put up the names in Irish of four houses in a cul de sac off the Shaws Road. The words are Cois Eluana, and the intention is to fix them to the wall of the end house below wording in English.

2. The builder had applied to the Belfast City Council for permission to so name the houses but it had been refused under the terms of the 1949 Public Health and Local Government Act, Section 29. The City Council's letter had been couched in 'stroppy' terms, but, O'Ceallaigh agreed the reply itself was not a proper subject for DFA representations. It was the Act itself, a direct responsibility of the British Government, about which the DFA wished to speak. (ie probe)

3. I should be grateful to have guidance on the reply to be made to the DFA.

Yours ever,

David Holt

D Holt

BF on 65/544/01  
65/544/02  
115/566/011 ✓

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