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RBS/298/86

cc. PS/Mr Bloomfield
Dr Quigley
Dr Hayes
Mr Green (DENI)
Mr Hamilton (DOE)
Mr Sullivan

Miss F Elliott

IRISH LANGUAGE IN NI

1. This note records initial reactions to the latest paper from the Irish and takes into account preliminary discussions with Arthur Green and Nigel Hamilton.
2. At the proposed meeting with the Secretariat on 24 July, we should, I think, concentrate on general policy and the Irish reactions to our paper and seek more time to consider in detail the "further views and proposals".
3. On general policy, I don't think that we can avoid exposing the gap between the Irish and the UK positions. The Irish are seeking a very positive approach to the development of the Irish language which amounts virtually to a case for a bilingual society. The UK position must remain that, while we recognise and will respect in certain circumstances the wish of individuals to speak and use Irish, we do not support bilingualism or parity of esteem. To the Irish argument that we must not allow Sinn Fein to highjack the Irish language, we must stress how counter-productive it would be in terms of relations between the two communities to force the pace on Irish language issues. In this context, one might also mention the recent Irish News headline on the publication of the SDLP policy document on the Irish language : "Irish language an aid to Irish unity".

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4. On the specific points:-

- 4.1 Irish version of NI Ordnance Survey Map : DOE will be examining urgently what would be involved in producing such a map.
- 4.2 Use of Irish language version of placenames : DOE will begin to examine whether OSNI could produce a list of the Irish language version of the more important placenames. We will, however, need to examine more fully what is involved in acceptance of the Irish language version. All public bodies (and the courts) would have to be involved. Who handles discussions with UK Departments, the Post Office etc? What legal authority is needed? Could we require unionist-controlled District Councils to co-operate? What is the legal position about the use of the Irish version of personal names? Could we take any immediate administrative action to allow NI Departments and NIO to accept the Irish version?
- 4.3 Irish language street names : We have discussed with DOE the various options for new legislation. I see a lot of merit in keeping any legislation as simple as possible, making the decisions at street level (rather than at District Council or ward level) and avoiding - as far as possible - politically charged appeals to the courts/DOE/a new quango. DOE are, therefore, considering the possibility of legislation which might say something along these lines -

"Where a District Council is satisfied that at least two-thirds of the electors in a street so desire, it shall arrange for the erection of a sign giving the street name in Irish as well as English".

This would mean that any appeal would be to the courts on the grounds that a Council was failing to exercise its powers. A further provision might provide for a Councillor to request the Council to ascertain the wishes of the electors in a street on whether they want dual language

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street signs. We have tended to gloss over the cost of implementing this policy and DOE will be trying to produce some rough estimates; the total bill for the signs and the street polls could be significant and provide certain Councils with a valid case for making progress slowly!

- 4.4 Dual language road signs : I see no reason for departing from our original view that this was not desirable. The latest Irish paper seems to imply a shifting of their ground to supporting bilingual signs where "appropriate", but even a limited use seems unjustified.
- 4.5 Parity of esteem in official business : The latest Irish paper recognises the practical difficulties and argues for a gradual approach, but I am sure that we must stick to our initial position. However, we might want to consider the wisdom of a general acceptance of Irish names and addresses by all public bodies.
- 4.6 Household Survey : You will have noted the Irish wish to be consulted about the questions to be asked and their concern that the Survey is so structured as to reflect the fact that interest in the Irish language may be concentrated in a few areas.
- 4.7 Financial support for Irish cultural activities : DENI will be considering how best to discuss this with the Arts Council. I think that it is in everyone's interests that this is handled sensitively. We do not want to reach a situation in which the Arts Council's programme/budget contains an "extra" provision for Irish cultural activities, which attracts political criticism.
5. Turning briefly to the Irish "further views and proposals", DENI will need time to examine the education points in detail, but it is immediately clear that the Irish are seeking a much more positive policy to promotion and development of the Irish language than we are likely to be willing to endorse. On the broadcasting issues, the Irish are pushing us towards interfering with the

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management decisions and commercial judgements of the broadcasting bodies.

6. As discussed, we will try to arrange a meeting next week when you plan to be in Belfast.



R B SPENCE

Central Secretariat

10 July 1986

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