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CONFIDENTIAL

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Res 5/10.

MR BELL, SIL
 MR BLACKWELL, LOB - M
 MR COSTON, RCB - M
 MR COULSON, ESTABS(L)
 MR FORSYTHE, ESTABS(B)-M
 MR McCONNELL, PAB - M
 MR McCLELLAND, CIJB - M
 MR McKILLOP, CJB - M
 MR SHANNON, POB - M

OWMS.

(12)

cc Mr A.W Stephens - M
 Mr Chesterton
 Mr Spence - M
 Mr Elliott - M
 Mr Innes - M
 Mr Palmer - M

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 - 10 OCT 1986
 STORMONT HOUSE ANNEX

**THE POSITION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND:
 PERSONAL AND PLACE NAMES**

1. As you know, there has been discussion of the position of the Irish language in Northern Ireland in the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Paragraph 6 of the Joint Statement of 17 June indicated a number of areas for possible future development. CPL is responsible for coordinating work set in hand by the NI Departments at the Secretary of State's request, against the general policy which he has decided. I write to you now, belatedly and apologetically, to consult you about the implications for your Divisions of one particular issue on which Central Secretariat has been consulting NI Departments. The only excuse for overlooking those nearer to home is my failure, amid other preoccupations, properly to pick up the threads on my return from leave earlier this month.

General policy

2. Firstly however, you will wish to know the general approach which the Secretary of State has decided to take to the Irish language. It is described below.

3. Everyone in Northern Ireland speaks English. There are no native Irish speakers. There is no official estimate of the number of people who have a knowledge of Irish. But from the

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information available the number is likely to be small. Against this background, the Government recognises and supports the wish of individuals to speak and use the Irish language, but not to the extent of promoting a bilingual society. It responds to demands through the education system and through support for the arts. Government policies in Scotland and Wales are similarly based on positive reaction to the will and wish of people to speak Scots Gaelic or Welsh. In Wales these factors are so strong and widespread that Welsh has been accorded equal status with English in certain aspects of official business and the Courts.

4. The Government is pledged in article 5 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions; there is no requirement to create a bilingual society in Northern Ireland. The overall objective is to promote reconciliation between them. It would arouse great opposition among the majority if Irish in Northern Ireland were given equal status to English. This would not help reconciliation. Nor does the number of people estimated to speak it justify that status. Nonetheless, the Secretary of State has decided that it may be possible within our policy to give more recognition to the use of Irish, to acknowledge the importance which some of the minority attach to the language.

Personal and Place names

5. The Irish Government have asked that Irish personal names and addresses might be recognised by the Northern Ireland authorities. Having agreed that DOE would produce a directory of the English and Irish version of place names, the Secretary of State's response was that the implications would be studied. The "NI authorities" cover a wide variety of bodies. We decided therefore to focus on the NIO, NI Departments, the NI Court Service and the security forces. Consultation with the last two are continuing (with the RUC and Army via LOB) but our soundings of the NI Departments reveal the following picture.

6. At common law a person is entitled to assume any name he wishes - Irish or English - and if he is generally known by that name, it is valid for purposes of legal identification. In the main, Departments accept the use of the Irish form of personal names in correspondence and on official documents but there is no uniformity of practice and no central guidance. We have established informally that they cause no difficulty to the Post Office.

7. The use of Irish place names on official documents is subject to legal constraint. A place name needs to identify a particular location for a wide variety of legal purposes, eg planning applications, rating, land registration: in the absence of registration to give legal effect to Irish forms of place names (which the Irish have in their Place Names (Irish Forms) Act 1975) the identification of locations could be disputed. The use of Irish forms of place names alone on official documents is therefore ruled out. But Departments agree that there appears to be no legal reason why the Irish and English form should not both appear where the recipient so wishes, and in principle would not object if this were made standard practice. The English form would remain the legal identification of the place. Thus an application for a driving licence bearing the Irish form of a place name would be accepted and the licence issued bearing that form alongside the English version.

8. There would be resource implications for all Departments. Record keeping would be complicated since the English version of a name received in Irish would have to be checked, presumably in the directory produced by DOE, and both versions would have to be noted. New official forms might have to be designed and computer programmes changed. But Departments believe that the problems would not be insuperable and are presently trying to quantify the cost.

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9. The Post Office already try to deliver correspondence with an Irish address, and given an approved list of Irish place names, would see no insurmountable difficulty in delivering official correspondence so addressed.

10. On this basis, Central Secretariat and I believe that it would be reasonable to recommend to Ministers that it should be standard practice for officials in NI Departments

(a) to accept the use of the Irish version of personal name by individuals in public business:

(b) to accept the use of the Irish version of place names by individuals, although in Government business the English version would still be used for official purposes.

We are not suggesting that correspondence in Irish should be replied to in Irish.

11. I should be grateful to know if such an approach would pose problems for the work of your Divisions and an estimate of any costs which would be incurred. I should like to be able to include the NIO in the recommendations. I know that Mr Palmer believes that the Prison Department record keeping needs to be integrated into that of the security forces and the Court system. We have discussed his concern and I await his views. I should be happy to talk over any of this with you. The Secretary of State and Ministers are discussing this and other Irish language issues in two weeks time. To enable me to put up a coordinated submission, it would be helpful to have your reactions by 7 October.

Frances Elliott

MISS D F E ELLIOTT

CPL

30 September 1986