

E.R.

BS 119/110

Miss Elliott

cc: PS/PUS (L&B)
 PS/Mr Bloomfield
 Mr Brennan
 Mr A W Stephens
 Dr Quigley
 Mr Elliott
 Mr Spence
 Mr Palmer
 Mr Blackwell
 NI Perm Secs
 Mr McAllister, IDB

THE POSITION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

I understand why, for tactical reasons, you may have felt it necessary to adopt the approach you have: if, as a result, Ministers are persuaded to accept your modest proposals, then I for one will certainly not complain. But neither we, nor Ministers, should overlook the fact that at the heart of our policies in Northern Ireland is the promoting of a society in which the traditions of both communities, and that must include their linguistic expression, are respected and helped to flourish. This, as you well know, is one of the underlying principles of the Anglo-Irish Agreement generally, and of Article 5(a) in particular. But whether you choose to draw attention to these facts or not, I believe that it would be tactically wise to remind Ministers, in terms, that none of the proposals in your submission in any way adversely affect the real interests of any members of the Protestant community. If ever there was a case of seeking to do something for nationalists (and, as I shall argue, not just for nationalists), without taking away from unionists, this is it.

2. There are a number of other general points passed over in your submission but of which it is important not to lose sight. They include the following:

E.R.

- (a) In accepting your recommendations, Ministers would be doing little more than giving greater status and perhaps slightly increasing the chances of survival as a living language of an ancient tongue whose continued existence and literary path enriches our common European culture; and
- (b) despite the bigoted reaction of those who appear opposed to the Irish language in itself, our efforts should, nevertheless assist in destroying the claim of Republican extremists to be the protectors of the Gaelic heritage in Northern Ireland. Your submission touches on this point but, given Irish views, I wonder whether you have still given it sufficient weight.

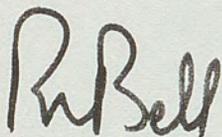
3. More generally, I support your strategy of promoting "Irishness" (paragraph 6) rather than the Irish language as such - provided it is recognised that certain aspects of Irishness are inseparable from the language. It is, I suggest, that wider complex of "Irishness" both linguistic and non-linguistic that you should be promoting as the common heritage of everyone in Ireland (and more widely). One example that I have in mind is the Heritage Centre maintained by North Down District Council (in Bangor Town Hall) where you will find a small, though excellent exhibition of a time when Bangor was a place of significance in Christendom, and the exhibitors have chosen in part to illustrate this period of glory by the display of a poem, with translation, in old Irish of the poem about the blackbird singing by Belfast Lough.

4. On a point of detail, concerning the official use of Irish, I suggest there is an important distinction to be drawn between resisting the use of Irish in correspondence from members of the public etc in Northern Ireland and in correspondence from

E.R.

the Republic. In the latter case, I suggest that we should be guided by our practice in regard to correspondence received in languages other than English from other countries outside the United Kingdom. Thus, if it is the case that we would not decline to deal with correspondence from France, or Quebec, on the grounds that it was in French, then we should not normally refuse to deal - unless a translation was supplied - with correspondents coming from the Republic of Ireland in Irish which, as Article 6 of the Republic's Constitution explains, ^{is} the first official language.

5. Finally, might your recommendations stand a better chance of speedy achievement if you specified more clearly who precisely was supposed to do what by when?



P N BELL

14. October 1986