



Minister of State



(F) 188/89

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Mr Robert Mahony
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12 December 1990

Dear Mr. Mahony,

Thank you for your letter of 8 November concerning the development of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. I am very pleased that you have followed up our conversation in Washington and I am delighted to provide you with a fuller account of our work in this area.

I am very much in agreement with your general comments on how best the language can be developed. You will not be surprised that the place of Irish in Northern Ireland can rouse deep passions and much of our effort is directed towards encouraging its development within a cultural rather than a political framework.

There are no exclusive Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. All Irish speakers also speak English. The 1987 Continuous Household Survey indicated that 11% (c 100,000) of the total population over 16 had some knowledge of Irish - 26% of Catholics but only 2% of Protestants. Within this total of 11% (with some knowledge) only 5% claimed to have full fluency and 34% to have elementary fluency; 80% never used Irish at home; and while 16% used it occasionally, only 1% did so on a daily basis.

Despite the limited knowledge and use of the language, Irish is seen by the minority community as an important part of their cultural heritage.

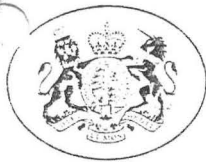
Some supporters of the language claim that it has a potential unifying influence within Northern Ireland. But it is in practice a symbol of the Irish identity, and needs to be respected as such.

I have responsibility for policy on the promotion and development of the Irish language and am aided by the Central Community Relations Unit. The Unit provides support for projects which increase awareness and appreciation of the contribution made by the language to the cultural heritage of both traditions in Northern Ireland.

The broad lines of the Government's policy on the Irish language are:

- to recognise and respect the special importance of the Irish language, principally to the minority side of the community;
- to encourage interest and appreciation of the Irish language and the contribution it has made to the cultural heritage of the whole community;
- to respond, where practical, to soundly based requests for assistance for Irish language activities;
- to acknowledge, however, that everyone in Northern Ireland speaks English and only a tiny minority actually use the Irish language. This places constraints on what can sensibly or practically be done within available resources, and the Government does not support the development of a bilingual society;
- to defuse the political issues posed by the Irish language and to seek to support the development of the language within a cultural framework.

All of this has been recognised by both the British and Irish Governments in the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In the review of the



working of the Intergovernmental Conference, the two Governments undertook to support efforts to enhance awareness and appreciation of the Irish language in the context of encouraging greater mutual understanding across the community, including respecting the cultural heritage of both traditions.

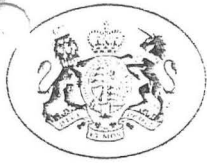
A particularly significant initiative which we have supported is the formation of the Ultach Trust, which aims to promote interest in and understanding of the language across the political and religious divide. Government has already provided a contribution to their start-up costs, and has agreed to match funds attracted from other sources up to a total of £250,000.

As you may know, education reform legislation now defines for the first time a statutory curriculum for all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland. Within that curriculum Language Studies is a compulsory area of work for pupils in secondary schools for those aged 11 to 16. All schools must provide at least one of French, Spanish, German or Italian but they may also provide Irish and any pupil who takes Irish satisfies the full requirements of this area of study. This policy recognises the important place which Irish plays, particularly in Catholic schools, and at present is taken by more than half the pupils in Catholic schools.

Languages are not formally studied in our primary schools but again Irish is fairly widely taught in Catholic schools where the teachers involved have the necessary expertise.

Irish is also widely taught in adult education classes and it has a full place in both of our universities which are internationally recognised for their work both in Celtic Studies generally and in Modern Irish.

In addition to the teaching of Irish in English medium schools there are presently 2 grant-aided schools which provide education through the



medium of Irish. The first of these, Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, is a free-standing, wholly Irish-medium Primary School. It is a maintained primary school and, as such, its teachers' salaries and other running costs are met in full from public funds. Capital expenditure is grant-aided at 85% in the same way as other maintained schools. The Bunscoil first achieved maintained status in 1984 when it had 123 pupils and it has since grown to an enrolment of over 350.

The second Irish medium unit is at Steelstown Primary School in Londonderry which is a maintained school where the main medium of instruction is English but which has an Irish-speaking stream. At present over 100 pupils are taught through the medium of Irish.

There are also 2 independent Irish-medium primary schools, Gaelscoil na bhFal in Belfast and Bunscoil Iur Chinn Tra in Newry.

Independent schools do not receive grants from Government and Irish medium schools are treated no differently from other schools in this respect. Before they can get grants they must demonstrate their viability which normally requires that the school should be of such a size as to ensure that the curricular needs of its pupils are fully met by a balanced educational provision.

The Department has not yet received any formal proposal either for free standing secondary school provision or special units. Any proposals received for Irish medium secondary education will of course be considered on their merits and again the viability requirements would be applied in a reasonable and practicable way to safeguard the interests of pupils.

You asked also about ways in which the Irish language can be introduced to the unionist population in Northern Ireland as well as to nationalists. This is obviously a difficult and very sensitive area



where it would be wrong, as you say in your letter, to impart any sense of compulsion or coercion to learn Irish. Nevertheless, in our new curriculum there will be a cross-curricular theme called Cultural Heritage which will be followed by all pupils. This is aimed at enabling pupils to understand all the various strands which form part of the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland, including the influence of Irish on such matters as place names and on Ulster speech. In this way we hope to broaden the experience of all pupils and enhance their understanding and respect for one another.

In Prisons, books in the Irish language are provided in libraries and there are teachers of Irish in all prison establishments. Although, for practical reasons, prisoners are not permitted to write or receive letters in the Irish language, a short greeting at the beginning or end of a letter is permissible. Prison records will include a reference to the Irish version of a name where it is used by a prisoner and mail etc will be accepted provided the name is clearly identifiable. Badges of educational achievement, including the Fainne, may now be worn by prisoners.

Substantial support is also provided for Irish language projects at local level by the Government's Action for Community Employment programme and the Belfast Action Team initiative. Expenditure on these programmes in the 1989/90 financial year amounted to more than £400,000.

These are all helpful measures which have been taken without significantly raising hackles within the majority community, and they have been welcomed by Irish language enthusiasts and the broader minority community. They do not go far enough for some who would like to see the language given parity with English which could not be justified. We are, however, responding sensitively, and will continue to do so, to responsible and legitimate demand for the support of the Irish language.



I hope this information is useful to you in your own work and if I can be of any further help please do not hesitate to write.

I too hope that we will have the opportunity to meet again at a future date.

Yours sincerely,
Brian Mawhinney

BRIAN MAWHINNEY

cc: PSI / Roy Master - General
(L, B + DENI)

PSI M of S. (L + B)

~~Mr Walker - CCRU.~~ 17/12.

Ms Mciver

Mr Cooper - CdeS.

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