

(P)

134/51

cc: Ms P McAlister

From: Mr T McCusker

To: Mr D J Watkins

23 April 1992

I would like to add my perspective on Irish language issues. I am writing to you to advise whether Government numbers are to continue a cultural identity and respond to the demand, or whether it should make a commitment towards the revitalisation and development of the language.

IRISH LANGUAGE

My position or simply being opposed to bilingualism is no longer valid. You asked me to set down the main points which we should be considering in relation to the review of Irish language policy. Attached is a list of the bullet points which I think we have to consider. I have been distant from the Irish language movement in reviewing policy. Our contacts with the Ulach - Trust and other Irish language bodies has influenced the position considerably.

1. The Irish language movement wants support and recognition for the language through education and other cultural mediums, but only to the extent justified by the scale of demand. There is recognition that a full dual approach is not feasible, but there is a feeling that the response of Government in a number of situations carries that policy to extremes.

2. Education is the most critical area of development for Irish language enthusiasts. They are convinced that both Irish medium provision and Irish teaching in English medium schools are essential for the preservation of the language and can be developed in a way which avoids many of the mistakes experienced by education provision in the Republic of Ireland.

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IRISH LANGUAGE REVIEW

BULL POINTS

1. There is a need for a clear objective on Irish language policy. This needs to make clear whether Government support is to recognise a cultural identity and respond to its demand, or whether it should make a commitment towards the preservation and development of the language.
2. A position of simply being opposed to bilingualism is no longer tenable in the light of the support for Irish language through a range of Government programmes.
3. We have not been distant from the Irish language movement in reviewing policy. Our contacts with the Ultach Trust and other Irish language bodies has influenced the position considerably.
4. The Irish language movement wants support and recognition for the language through education and other cultural mediums, but only to the extent justified by the scale of demand. There is recognition that a full bilingual approach is not feasible, but there is a feeling that the response of Government in a number of situations carries that policy to extremes.
5. Education is the most critical area of development for Irish language enthusiasts. They are convinced that both Irish medium provision and Irish teaching in English medium schools are essential for the preservation of the language and can be developed in a way which avoids many of the mistakes experienced by education provision in the Republic of Ireland.

6. Despite what Stephen Peover outlines in his minute of 6 April, the perception of DENI among Irish language enthusiasts is of a Department opposed in principle to Irish language development and that every advance has to be squeezed from them. The most recent example is the second primary school in Belfast which all those involved fervently believe would have been approved by now as viable had it been an integrated school rather than an Irish language school.
7. Stephen Peover's minute disputes whether the policy of DENI is "reactive", but the reality is that they are perceived to be unsympathetic and unhelpful.
8. The question of Unionist reaction has, of course, to be considered very carefully. In this context I am a little unclear about Stephen Peover's reference in paragraph 12 of his minute to the issue. The question here is whether a change of policy to a more supportive model would draw a greater Unionist reaction than the recent policy initiatives. At the end of the day a judgement has to be made about this but any change can be put in the context of a wider European policy moves towards the recognition, presentation and development of minority languages; and this can serve to depoliticise the issue. Presentation of policy is critical and the dividing line between a Government response to demand for support and facilities for the use of Irish language and an active policy of promotion of Irish language is very thin indeed.
9. The 2 pieces of legislation on street names and the use of English in courts, would have to be repealed whether as part of this review or in response to the discussion on the Draft Charter on Minority Languages. Doing that

in isolation from a policy review might be a useful test of community reaction.

10. Ultimately we have to decide whether to carry a review to the extent that we look in great detail at the sorts of responses or concessions that might be made about the use of the language or to decide on a broad policy strategy from which change will emerge on a variety of fronts based on thorough analysis of demand, cost, and the ability to respond positively. Essentially the draft review paper is suggesting this incremental approach.