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cc: PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Watkins
Mr Thomas
Mr Leach
Mr Stephens
Mr Maccabe
Mr Hill, CPL
Mr S Smith
Mrs Jendoubi
Mr Higgins
Mr Morrow ✓

Mr Gifford 22/3

From: Mr J A Canavan
CCRU

21 March 1996

To: PS/Michael Ancram (DENI, B&L)

BRIEFING FOR MINISTERS MEETING WITH SDLP DELEGATION, 27 MARCH 1996

1. DENI Private Office has requested briefing for a meeting between Michael Ancram and a SDLP delegation on Irish language issues at Rathgael on Wednesday, 27 March 1996.
2. DENI is providing separate briefing on funding of Irish language schools. The other item on the agenda proposed by the SDLP was Government policy towards Irish language and culture. DENI has provided a separate brief on the Arts Council and I attach general briefing on Government policy towards the Irish language.
3. I have given this a wider circulation than usual, as the issue may be of interest to those engaged with the SDLP in other fora. The members of the delegation will be

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Mrs Brid Rodgers, Micheal O Mairtin, Sean Farren and
Patsy McGlone.

[Signed: JAC]

J A CANAVAN

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GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS THE IRISH LANGUAGE

LINES TO TAKE

Government Policy towards the Irish Language

Government recognises the importance of the Irish language for many people in Northern Ireland as part of their cultural heritage. It respects the special importance of Irish, encourages interest in it and appreciation of it, and highlights its contribution to the cultural heritage of the whole community.

Level of Government Expenditure Much Lower than in Scotland and Wales.

Financial comparisons with expenditure on Celtic languages in Scotland and Wales can be misleading. In those two countries there are well defined areas where the ancient languages have traditionally been spoken and the residents can be assumed to be users of those languages. In Northern Ireland, in contrast, demand for Irish language facilities has to be demonstrated.

Giving Irish a Comparable Status to Welsh under the Welsh Language Act

The situations are very different. In Northern Ireland the overwhelming majority of the population (almost all Unionists and many Nationalists) have no knowledge of Irish. The Irish language has the potential to be politically divisive in a way which Welsh is not. Enforcing bilingualism on the population of Northern Ireland is neither practical nor desirable.

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Broadcasting in Irish

Broadcasting in Irish on Northern Ireland based radio and television channels is the responsibility of the BBC and the independent companies. They have shown themselves responsive to demand for Irish language broadcasting.

Technical discussions have been ongoing for some time between British and Irish experts on improving reception for Irish TV channels, including Teilifis na Gaeilge. Though not an issue within the responsibilities of the NIO, it has been raised at the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

New technology (cable) may offer a solution in the medium term to people in Belfast wishing to receive TnaG.

TnaG is also in contact with officials about the economic opportunities for TV production companies in NI and the training and job creation implications.

Council Of Europe Charter For Lesser Used Languages

The Government has not yet announced a final decision on whether to sign the Charter. A number of UK Departments have a direct interest and the Welsh Office is in the lead.

Streetnames Legislation

This has now been in operation since May 1995 and has proved less controversial than some had feared. The legislation had to strike a balance between the rights of Irish users and monolingual English speakers, and between the responsibilities of District Councils and the right of residents.

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GOVERNMENT POLICY ON IRISH LANGUAGE

BACKGROUND

1. Nationalists have always identified strongly with the Irish language. They contrast the efforts made to sustain and promote it in the Republic since 1922 with the lack of interest shown by the former Northern Ireland administration. For the past 10 years, however, Government has been increasingly responsive to Irish language interests. It is regarded as an important strand in the complex cultural background of Northern Ireland which should be valued as such by all sections of the community. The Ultaich Trust (established in 1987 with a trust fund partly supported by Government) is the leading promoter of this open and non-political approach to the language. More extreme enthusiasts, often with the backing of Sinn Fein, demand bilingualism in administration and public life, as their interpretation of "parity of esteem". The SDLP's policy position is set out in the attached annex, which was a presentation by Mr McGlone to a Belfast Conference in 1995.

2. In the 1991 Census 142,000 people claimed some ability to speak, read or write Irish. This is not surprising as Irish is widely taught in almost all Catholic and integrated secondary schools. However, the number of people who would regard themselves as members of an Irish language community, or who use the language on a regular basis, is much lower (probably in the region of 5,000). Virtually everyone who uses Irish in Northern Ireland will have English as a first language, and so will suffer no practical inconvenience from using English, eg in administrative forms.

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3. Unlike the Celtic languages of Scotland and Wales, Irish in Northern Ireland does not have a geographic heartland with an unbroken tradition of daily use of the language. Irish users are dispersed within an overwhelmingly English speaking community.

4. The Government will respond positively, where practicable, to soundly based requests for assistance. In the last financial year (1994/95) Government spent £2m on projects with an Irish language dimension. This consisted of:
 - Department of Education funding for Irish medium schools and curriculum materials - £1,140,000
 - Training and Employment Agency assistance through the ACE schemes for Irish language projects - £330,000
 - Making Belfast Work support for Irish language projects in Belfast - £64,000
 - NIO educational and translation facilities for prisoners - £37,500
 - CCRU grants to Irish language projects, including Ultach Trust - £381,000
 - Arts Council of Northern Ireland grants - £70,500

5. The Government also seeks to remove unnecessary obstacles to the wider use of the language, eg the repeal of the 1949 legislation on street names. In public administration, the Government's policy is to deal with Irish speakers on the basis of courtesy and respect for their linguistic preference. People writing

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to Departments in Irish will have their letters translated and will receive a reply (in English) in the normal way. However, Government has drawn the line at steps towards official bilingualism (Secretary of State's Coleraine speech of December 1992). This could be politically divisive and would undermine progress in recent years in extending interest in the Irish language to the wider Northern Ireland community. There was some recent publicity about the lack of an Irish translation of the new written driving test, while a Chinese version would be available for NI's largest ethnic minority group.

6. Experience of the new law on bilingual streetnames has shown it to be an uncontroversial measure in practice. At least one Council (Moyle) has used its powers since it came into operation in May. The SDLP may regard this as proving that it does not go far enough in giving the right of initiative to residents. Alternatively it could be argued that the legislation struck a fair balance.
7. The SDLP may attach importance to the Council of Europe Charter on Regional or Minority Languages, which has been signed by 14 of the 38 members of the Council. At the end of 1995 the relevant territorial Ministers decided that the UK should not sign the Charter but the Welsh Office, which is in the lead, has not yet found a politically opportune occasion for an announcement. This should not be disclosed to the delegation.
8. Since the late 1980's the Irish Government has aspired to the establishment of a dedicated Irish language television channel, Telefis na Gaeilge. However, it is only in the past two years that a firm financial commitment has been made to the service, which is

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expected to begin transmission at the end of 1996. TnaG staff understand that the service will be capable of reception in Northern Ireland in those areas which currently receive RTE. It is likely that reception in the Greater Belfast area will be difficult and West Belfast Irish users will therefore be denied access to the channel. The issue of reception of existing RTE channels is technically complex and is the subject of on-going discussions between British and Irish experts (in the UK the expertise lies with the Radio Communications Agency of DTI). The latest information from the RCA is that a technical solution to the satisfaction of both sides may now be achievable. If not, other technical innovations, eg cable and digital TV, may provide a medium term solution.

9. In 1994 Mr Higgins, the Irish Minister responsible for Irish language and broadcasting issues, unilaterally proposed an all-Ireland Irish language service. This was formally raised with the British side at an IGC in 1994. Leaving aside the financial issues, the technical issues are extremely complex. With the passage of time and the establishment of Telefis na Gaeilge, the option of an all-Ireland service, supported by both Governments, may seem less attractive to Irish officials. The new service may offer economic opportunities to NI television production companies. This is to be encouraged. A meeting involving TnaG, television production companies, local enterprise and training agencies, the Ultach Trust and CCRU has been organised for 29 March at the Celtic Film Festival in Wales.

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THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN THE SIX COUNTIES

1. It is the opinion of the SDLP that the Irish language belongs to all the people of Ireland. Because of historical reasons, however, it is a central part of the identity of the nationalist community.
2. The fostering of linguistic and cultural identity is a basic human right.
3. That cultural fostering contributes to the wealth and pluralism of society.
4. Equality of esteem for pluralism does not present a threat to any community.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN THE SIX COUNTIES

1. According to the 1991 Census there were 142,003 people in the six counties who understood the Irish language (1).
2. In 1994/95 £2,002,115 was spent by the British Government on Irish language matters. (2). (The finance comes from several sources and that figure includes expenditure on schools which, in any event should come under the responsibility of the Department, as well as money spent on the censorship of prisoners' correspondence.)
3. In 1994/95 £11,133,000 was spent by the British Government on the promotion of the Scottish Gaelic (2) - including £8,700,000 for a Gaelic television service.
4. When the abovementioned figures are examined £14.24 was spent per person in the six counties while £159.09 per person was spent in Scotland as far as linguistic matters are concerned. This is no exception, as the figures for the previous years are worse again. There is proof that the Irish language is being discriminated against in the six counties despite what has been said by the British Government regarding the fostering of equality of esteem and their international obligations in that regard (3).
5. The difference between words and actions is patently clear:

"My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Scotland supports the Gaelic language and culture by providing grants (a) to education authorities to provide Gaelic medium education; (b) for the making of TV programmes in Gaelic; and (c) to cultural organisations committed to maintaining and developing the use of the language. It is hoped that these measures will lead to an increase in the use of Gaelic in Scotland.

The Government recognise that the Irish language is an important part of the cultural heritage of many people in Northern Ireland. The Government manifest respect for the special importance of the language of those people, encourage interest in it and appreciation of it for its own sake rather than any political connotations, and seek to highlight the contribution that the language has made to the cultural heritage of the whole community." (4)

THE FUTURE OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE

1. It is clear from what has been said how important the Irish language is to the people of Ireland. For the Irish speakers of the six counties it is extremely important that recognition be given to the Irish language and that the British Government have a positive policy regarding the promotion of the language.

2. The Director for Local Authorities Environment of the European Council, Dr. Ferdinando Albanese, gave an excellent insight into the basic rights of speakers of minority or regional languages:

"...Although the Charter does not grant individual rights but proposes to States to adopt positive internal legal measures, I would say that, broadly speaking, the Charter aims at satisfying four fundamental rights for speakers of a regional or minority language:

- (a) the right to exist;
- (b) the right to keep their personal identity and culture;
- (c) the right to communicate to others their own cultural wealth;
- (d) the right to dignity."(5)

3. In order to give proper status to the Irish language, it is recommended to the British Government to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and, more importantly, to comply completely with the obligations thereof. It is astonishing that the Irish Government have not yet signed the Charter.

4. In the meantime, however, there are practical steps that can be taken especially under the auspices of the Anglo-Irish Conference. For example:-

(i) Ensuring that RTÉ and Raidió na Gaeltachta broadcasts and, when set up, Teilifís na Gaeilge broadcasts are widely available throughout the six counties;

(ii) Encouragement of the media to co-operate in the making of Irish language programmes with organisations/associations in the six counties. That might have the effect of encouraging the BBC/UTV to broadcast more Irish language programmes and would help Teilifís na Gaeilge;

(iii) Putting pressure on the British Government to promote education through the medium of Irish - the progress of the Irish language is being hindered by the Department's rules. In spite of that, it is likely that there is potential for the Irish language, especially in the pre-school area, through the European Programme for peace and reconciliation. The Department of Education must give as much assistance as possible in this regard.

(iv) Encouraging co-operation in the arts (music, dance, poetry, literature, film-making).

The preservation of the Irish language and Gaelic culture carries with it a heavy burden. The most basic way of achieving this aim is to use the language as much as possible. At the end of the day, if it is used widely it cannot be ignored.

REFERENCES

- (1) The Northern Ireland Census 1991, Irish Language Report, HMSO Belfast 1993.
- (2) Response of the Minister of State, Michael Ancram MP, to a question put down by Joe Hendron MP on 18 August 1995.
- (3) *c.f.* European Convention on Human Rights, 1953;
The Copenhagen Document on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), 1990;
The Helsinki Declaration (CSCE), 1992;
The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 1992;
Council of Europe Vienna Declaration, 1993.
- (4) Sir Wyn Roberts, Secretary of State for Wales in Westminster, 7 March, 1994.
- (5) Speech entitled "The Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages" delivered by Dr. Ferdinando Albanese on 24 July, 1995.