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Reference Code:	2017/4/60
Creation Dates:	21 January 1987
Extent and medium:	12 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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AGENDA ITEM 4: IRISH LANGUAGE

Brief
for proposed
meeting of
IGC on 21-1-81

Concern at Delay

I am concerned at the delay in bringing forward a number of reforms in this area. I understand the difficulties caused for you by the leak of confidential papers to the Newsletter. I feel it is important that disclosures are not allowed to achieve their aim of preventing reforms.

Bilingual Street Names

When will you be publishing the draft Order abolishing the ban on Irish language street signs? We feel it is important to remove this discrimination now whatever the difficulties about future finance for street signs or local decision making.

Placenames/Personal Names

We have been discussing the use of Irish forms of personal and place names in official business. Seamus Mallon has raised a particular place name case (Port Mor). How far have you got in this; when will any necessary legislation be announced?

Support for Irish Language Cultural Activities

What response have you had from the Arts Council to your invitation to consider the question of additional support for Irish language cultural activities? Are you in a position now to announce extra finance for Irish cultural activities?

● -Mac Airt Naoiscoil

The staff and parents of this school have made a courageous public stand against any paramilitary involvement in their school. We must support them. It is vital that you find a means to continue their funding after February.

Agenda Item Four: The Irish Language in Northern Ireland
Background Note

1. Summary

The Irish language in NI has been discussed at the meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference on 10 January, 17 June and 6 October 1986, on the basis of proposals in a number of areas made in papers handed over by the Irish side in January and July, to which the British responded with papers in June and October. In addition to regular exchanges at official level, a number of short papers of an informal or factual nature have been exchanged, and a meeting of officials was held in the Secretariat on 24 July to discuss all the issues concerning the language in the North. Progress was quite rapid in a number of areas, but since the publication of confidential British papers in the Newsletter on 25 September, the British have grown increasingly nervous about reforms in these areas, thus realising the object of the person who leaked the papers.

(i) We have been led to understand since July that the British were preparing a draft Order in Council which would at least remove the 1949 prohibition on Irish language streetsigns, and perhaps also introduce a positive provision entitling residents of a street to erect bilingual signs should they so desire. We have received no indication since the Autumn of the progress being made on this legislation, nor any official indication that British thinking has changed.

(ii) Place and Personal Names In June the British undertook to examine the implications an acceptance of Irish language place and personal names would have for central and local government and public bodies, and methods of implementing such a reform, if decided upon. At the

Conference on 6 October 1986 they raised again the possibility of legal and administrative difficulties with the use of Irish forms. Our side sought to re-assure them on the basis of the experience in this State and provided a further paper on the matter.

(iii) Irish Language Cultural Activities In their June paper and at the meeting of officials on 24 July, the British undertook to consider the possibility of setting up a separate division of the Arts Council to support Irish language publications and cultural activities and to approach the Arts Council with this suggestion and an offer of extra finance and personnel to discharge these responsibilities. We have not been informed of the results of these discussions, or even if they have taken place.

(iv) A current issue which also needs to be raised with the British as a matter of urgency (due to the restricted timetable involved and the degree of public interest) is the withdrawal of ACE financial support from the MacAirt Naoiscoil in the Short Strand in Belfast. The school has cut its links with the paramilitary-dominated local tenants association, and means should be found to continue its support.

2. Discussion

We submitted a paper to the British on 6 January 1986, through the Secretariat on the Irish language in Northern Ireland. This proposed quick action in four areas: Street names, use of Irish in official business, questions on Irish in the 1991 census and support for Irish language cultural activities.

These points were raised by the Minister and discussed at the third meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference on 10

January 1986, and at the 17 June meeting. After this meeting, the British side handed over a paper responding to our proposals.

We handed over a second paper on Irish on July 4, renewing and reinforcing the original proposals and making new proposals on Irish in the prisons, in broadcasting and in the educational system.

A meeting of officials, on the Irish language, was held in the Secretariat on 24 July, to consider and expedite progress in the areas raised by the Irish side.

On 25 September the Newsletter printed copies of leaked internal NIO documents on the Irish language, indicating the probable lines which the British intended to take. The Irish side in the Secretariat delivered a short informal paper to the British on 1 October, making some comments on technical points in the leaked British papers.

The Irish language was further discussed at the Conference meeting on 6 October, and work has continued at official level throughout. In particular, we have provided the British with information on the way in which our legal and administrative systems cope with the recognition of Irish, in placenames, personal names, streetnames, the courts, official correspondence etc.

Progress has slowed greatly since the Newsletter leaks, as the British have become very nervous of producing any reforms along the lines envisaged in the leaked papers.

There are three particular areas in which we should demand progress. These are: streetnames (bilingual signs); place and personal names (official recognition); and support of Irish language cultural activities.

3. Streetnames

- 3.1 The Northern Ireland Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949 states that street names may only be "put up or painted" in the English language. In our first paper on Irish, submitted in January, we proposed that this section of the Act be repealed and replaced with a positive provision entitling residents to erect a bilingual nameplate on their street if they so desired.

In their response handed over in June, the British reacted favourably to this proposal: "We agree that it would be right to allow local residents to decide whether or not they want bilingual streetnames. Work is in hand on a practical scheme to implement this".

- 3.2 In the discussion on Irish held in the Secretariat on 24 July, the British side indicated that the delays in bringing forward reforms on this matter centred on the question of how to assess local choice and how to circumvent the anticipated refusal of loyalist councils to co-operate. The Irish side then proposed that the simple matter of repealing the 1949 provision be proceeded with immediately, while the more complex matter of positive entitlement be left for further work and discussion. The British side agreed to consider this and agreed to try and publish the draft Order(s) in Council giving effect to these proposals in the Autumn.

The effect of the removal of the ban would be to enable nationalist controlled District Councils to allow and facilitate the erection of bilingual street signs where the residents so desire. Nationalists living in unionist controlled District Councils would still be unable to do so (as discretion in this matter at present rests entirely with the District Council) until the positive entitlement was made law.

- 3.4 In informal exchanges at official level during August and September, the British indicated that work on the draft Orders was proceeding, without any major problems of principle, and that the draft Orders would appear shortly (although not before the 6 October Conference meeting).

On 25 September, the Newsletter published leaked confidential NIO papers, including a letter from Environment Minister Richard Needham to the Secretary of State, giving details of proposed action on the Irish language. He proposed that legislation should be published in the Autumn to remove the 1949 ban and to require District Councils to erect bilingual street signs where residents, by appropriate majority, so chose. In the discussion on Irish at the 6 October Conference, the Minister said that it would be unhelpful if it transpired that the percentage of householders on a street required to add an Irish version to the existing English street name were higher than the percentage required to change a streetname.

- 3.5 Since the publication of the leaked papers, the British have become very nervous of reforms along these lines. On the question of the positive entitlement to erect Irish names, they have discovered new difficulties in assessing local opinion and financing the erection of the signs, and there has been no sign of progress on the simpler question of removing the 1949 ban.
- 3.6 In the absence of such movement, Sinn Fein has attempted to pre-empt reform by intensifying its provision of Irish streetnames in certain areas. The RUC has on occasion responded by removing such signs (e.g. Lurgan). We have protested against such action and pointed out that the

inexplicable delay in at least removing the 1949 provision is enabling Sinn Fein to make further capital out of this issue.

4. Place and Personal Names

- 4.1 In accordance with normal UK practice, public authorities in Northern Ireland will only recognise, for legal purposes, one official name for each place or person in Northern Ireland, and they make no allowance for our system whereby each person or place may have an Irish and English form of their name, each legally valid. The result of this has been to cause difficulty to nationalists who wish to adopt the Irish form of their name. This is legally quite possible in the UK, but in the Northern Ireland context it has been difficult to have such usage accepted by public authorities. Placenames are a more difficult problem, as there is no legal method to change an established placename and public authorities will therefore only recognise the 'accepted' anglicised forms. The difficulties this can cause for nationalists are exemplified by the Port Mor case brought to our attention by Seamus Mallon, where a driving instructor in the nationalist village of Port Mor is having his livelihood threatened due to the refusal of the Department of the Environment to renew his driving licence unless he applies using the unconnected and locally unused anglicised 'official' name Blackwatertown.
- 4.2 In our January paper on Irish, we proposed that the Northern Ireland Office draw up an official list of Irish forms of NI placenames, and authorise public authorities to recognise the use of these forms, and of Irish language personal names, in official business. The British response, contained in their June paper, was in

cautious agreement with our proposals. They agreed that such an authoritative list should be prepared, and accepted that public authorities should recognise both. They undertook to examine the implications such an acceptance would have on the work of government departments and public bodies. They also agreed to consider creating a mechanism for changing placenames.

- 4.3 As a result of discussion on this matter at the official level meeting on the Irish language held in the Secretariat on 24 July, we provided the British with a short paper on the way in which our legal system coped with the existence of alternative Irish and English forms of names for persons and places. The essence of this paper was that this practice caused no real problems whatsoever in our legal system.

Our Placenames Commission has been supplying Irish forms of Northern Ireland placenames to the Northern Ireland Ordnance Survey, in response to a request from them. The NIOS is preparing for publication a bilingual map of the north of Ireland.

At the 24 July meeting and in subsequent exchanges, British officials indicated that they had no problems in principle and few in practice with the question of authorising public recognition of Irish language place and personal names.

- 4.4 The leaked Needham letter printed in the Newsletter on 25 September indicated that the British were proposing to fund research for an authoritative list of Irish language forms of N.I. placenames; draw up an interim list with the aid of our Placenames Commission; consider the implications, in terms of resources and efficiency, of public authorities accepting the use of Irish language

place and personal names; and consider how to ensure that such acceptance extended to Councils and bodies controlled by unionist parties, in the face of expected opposition.

4.5 At the October Conference Meeting the British side referred to possible legal and administrative difficulties which they felt might arise from the use of Irish language forms. We responded to their concerns based on our experience in the State with a paper subsequently transmitted through the Secretariat. Since then we have had no indication from the British as to the state of play on any of these proposals other than the map, which is still being prepared, and our information on this has come largely from our own Placenames Commission. It is important that the momentum which was built up on this issue is not lost, and we should seek information on the progress made to date by the British in their consideration of these matters, viz

(i) The production of the list of Irish placename forms

(ii) The comparatively simple matter of directing Government Departments (e.g. the Department of the Environment in the Port Mor case) to recognise Irish language place and personal names.

(iii) The more difficult problem of ensuring that loyalist councils and bodies recognise persons' rights to use such names in official business.

5. Irish Language related Cultural Activities

5.1 In our January paper we proposed that an appropriate body be established to provide support for Irish language publications and cultural activities, which are not catered for within existing categories of Arts Council support.

- 5.2 The British response, in their June paper on Irish, was that a separate body to promote Irish language cultural activities would be unnecessarily divisive, but that they would invite the Arts Council to consider whether it would like additional funds for the support of Irish language.
- 5.3 In response to this, we suggested that a separate division of the Arts Council could be established to fulfil this role. The British side agreed to consider this idea and to raise it with the Arts Council, along with the earlier proposal for extra funding and personnel.
- 5.4 We have received no indication since then of whether the British have indeed spoken to the Arts Council about these proposals, and if so what their response has been.
6. Mac Airt Naoiscoil
- 6.1 A public controversy has arisen about the withdrawal of ACE support for the Mac Airt Naoiscoil in the Short Strand area of Belfast, and in view of the timescale involved (support for the school runs out on 20 February) the question of renewing the school's support might be raised at the Conference.
- 6.2 In November, the Department of Economic Development informed the Naoiscoil that ACE support, which paid for two teachers (out of three) and a driver would be withdrawn at the expiry of the current grant on 20 February, because of the possible paramilitary links of its Governing Body, the St. Matthew's Tenants Association.
- 6.3 The school principal has courageously stated in public that the school has no paramilitary associations. At our suggestion, transmitted through the SDLP, the school has apparently broken its links with the Tenants Association,

which has indeed been taken over by the Provisionals, and set up its own Governing Body, which has now reapplied for ACE support. (Our information on this comes from SDLP sources).

- 6.4 The school committee has now been informed the DED that this will be treated as an application from a new body, and join the queue for ACE support. This would mean that support would not be likely to resume until April, while the schools current funding will run out in February.
- 6.5 As a result our representations to the British, they have admitted that funding could probably be found to cover this gap, if a strong case were made. It is important that the British agree to renew the school's funding from February, and that this decision be publicly announced as soon as possible.

The school's problems have been widely reported in the media and exploited in statements by Sinn Fein. At least some of those actually involved in the school, however, are aware and very appreciative of the involvement and concern of the SDLP, this Department and the Minister in the matter. Failure to renew ACE support would be exploited by those hostile to the Agreement.

January, 1987.