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The Irish Language in Northern Ireland - Some Problems

1. The treatment of the language in education is generally satisfactory. Pupils may take Irish in school and for the relevant examinations. Assistance is been given to schools teaching all subjects through Irish, examples being the Scoil Ghaelach in Belfast and the provision for an Irish speaking element in a primary school in Derry.

2. Streetnames and Placenames
Rural District Councils and Urban District Councils have responsibility for the putting up and painting of streetnames. Under Section 19 of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1949, Rural District Councils and Urban District Councils 'shall not cause such name (street) to be put up or painted otherwise than in English'. The effect of this legislation has been to prevent District Councils where they so wish, erecting street or placenames in the Irish language.

3. The Minister might wish to recommend to Mr. Hurd the repeal of the relevant sections of the 1949 Act so as to enable local councils, where they so wished, the right to erect street signs in Irish as well as in English. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, justice demands that if a group of citizens wish to have their street named in Irish they should be entitled to so have it. Secondly, the issue is one which causes irritation to a very considerable number of nationalists and is seen by them as repression of their heritage by the majority community. (Officials have asked the Embassy to have the 1949 Act looked into).

4. The Minister might also wish to encourage the British to provide facilities to enable persons to have their cases heard in Irish in the courts if they so wish.

5. The United Kingdom may be breach of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Physical Rights, article 27 of which reads
'In those States which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture to profess and

practice their own religion, or to use their own language.' This Covenant has been ratified by the United Kingdom and the 1949 Act would seem to be incompatible with it.

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D. O'Ceallaigh

24 January, 1985