



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SECRET

Meeting with Ciaran O hEigartaigh of the BBC,
Belfast, 4 February, 1986.

Ciaran O hEigartaigh is the BBC Radio Ulster producer responsible for schools programming in Irish and currently for the weekly general Irish language programme. He is about 28/29 and after graduating from Queen's spent a year teaching English in Italy and two years teaching at St. MacNissis College, Garron Tower, Co. Antrim before taking up his present post in 1983.

He told me that Irish language programming began at Radio Ulster in 1981 with a half hour programme each week hosted by poet Paul Muldoon. The current position is that a fifteen minute general chat/music programme in Irish goes out each Tuesday at 6.45 pm and is repeated once. This is a temporary situation caused by BBC cutbacks (all Radio Ulster "domestic" production after 7pm has been suspended) and lasting from January to March this year. In March the programme will revert to its usual half hour format (O hEigartaigh expressed frustration at having currently to work within the constraints of a fifteen minute slot).

In March too the BBC will place an advertisement seeking a full time producer for general programmes in Irish. Schools programming will remain O hEigartaigh's responsibility but he will continue to contribute to general programmes. Current schools output amounts to ten programmes a year and a range of back up study materials, for which he is also responsible, accompanies the course. He does not intend to apply for the new post himself (it will be at his own level of producer). O hEigartaigh feels that the new appointment could well lead to an Irish language programme on BBC Northern Ireland television

later this year. In context the progress made since 1981 is reasonable he says. He also added, somewhat facetiously, that "tokenism is better than nothing". He favours a step by step approach and said that in fact there had not been much hostility from within the BBC itself to the Irish programmes. There had, however, he recalled been hostile references to Irish and "Catholics in the BBC" two years ago at Unionist annual conferences. The Controller of Programmes in Radio Ulster, Arwell Ellis-Owen, is a Welshman and a Welsh speaker, who was appointed last year and is sympathetic to Irish.

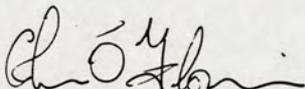
In a general comment on BBC Radio, O hEigearthaigh said it is "in trouble". In the cutbacks so far they have managed to concentrate on cleaning, security and other services avoiding too drastic an effect on production of programmes. But Downtown Radio is now the main station in the North and the BBC has simply not responded to the challenge. Gerry Anderson, the Radio Foyle personality whose programme is now taken generally on Radio Ulster was mentioned but O hEigearthaigh commented that BBC in the North have no one in the Gay Byrne/Mike Murphy class.

Regarding other broadcasting media in Northern Ireland, O hEigearthaigh said that the new station manager of Radio Foyle, Joe Mahon, is sympathetic and an Irish language programme will begin transmission shortly. He felt that it would be useful to contact Mahon at this time. In response to a letter from the Cultural Affairs officer of Provisional Sinn Fein Marty Millar, Ulster Television recently conducted a market survey of the demand for Irish programmes. The result showed, said O hEigearthaigh, that there were 20,000 Irish speakers and 70,000 others who would have an interest in such programmes. UTV's attitude is apparently that such figures are not "commercially viable". O hEigearthaigh commented that they would be even more cautious in their approach than the BBC.

We spoke about Gearoid O Caireallain of "La", Radio Feirste and Mean, the Irish media pressure group. O hEigearthaigh described him as a good friend of his. He said that O Caireallain is not

a member of Provisional Sinn Fein. O Caireallain, his girlfriend Aoife and one or two other people switched their energies to the Irish language "pirate" radio station Radio Feirste when the newspaper "La" suspended publication some weeks ago. The radio has a radius of about eight miles from the centre of Belfast (its transmitting apparatus is located there). At the moment it is not contactable because its telephone line has been cut due to non-payment of bills. O Caireallain also reports from Belfast for Radio na Gaeltachta and appeared on "Feach" on RTE television. O hEigartaigh expressed admiration for O Caireallain's efforts on behalf of Irish which began when he opted out of Queen's University. (He expressed corresponding criticism of more traditional activists in the language movement saying that Comhaltas Uladh were "not up to much"). He felt that O Caireallain was worth contacting and offered to arrange an informal meeting if this were thought desirable.

O hEigartaigh himself was glad to have been contacted by us and suggested that we stay in touch. He commented that he had expected "the first approach to be from the NIO".



Colm O Floinn

11 February 1986.

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