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Visit to the Bunscoil Ghaelach, Belfast, 13 May 1986

[The Bunscoil now has, as is well known, "maintained status" in the Northern Ireland context. Further assistance which those involved with the school feel could be given by the Northern authorities is reported in detail at pages 5 to 8. It may be helpful to highlight here in summary form two short-term priorities as seen by the Bunscoil people:

- Go-ahead from the Northern Ireland Department of Education for the purchase of 2.75 acres of land adjoining their current site and the provision thereon of two prefabricated classrooms in time for a September 1986 intake of 80 new pupils.
- Maintained status for a nursery school which is attached to the Bunscoil and which caters for 100 infants].

I met Aine Nic Iolair who is Principal of the Shaw's Road Bunscoil in Andersonstown, West Belfast on 13 May 1986. We had a lengthy discussion in her house which is one of twelve forming the Shaw's Road "Gaeltacht" community and then visited the Bunscoil itself which is immediately adjacent to these houses. Ms. Nic Iolair was accompanied for much of the time by her husband Seoirse who is treasurer of the Bunscoil (a voluntary position - he is otherwise unemployed) and who showed me round the school buildings while the Principal was engaged in her office. He explained in detail some of the financial difficulties facing the parents who support the school.

The Bunscoil was founded in 1971 using a second-hand prefabricated hut which is now in use as a nursery school building on the site but very definitely nearing the end of its useful life. (However, apparently some enthusiasts propose to move this hut to another site in Belfast to establish a new

nursery school over the summer. The undersigned would not consider it suitable any longer for such a purpose as the wooden structure is in fact rotting and there is a very noticeable stench inside it). It will be recalled that from 1 September 1984 the Bunscoil was granted maintained status by NIO Minister Nicholas Scott which means that its teachers' salaries are now paid in full and it is eligible for 85% State grants towards buildings and land. In February of this year new prefabricated buildings were provided mainly as a result of the decision to grant maintained status (the parents themselves had, of course, to find 15% of the cost of most of the buildings and the full cost of two classrooms not "sanctioned" by the Northern authorities) and were opened by Cardinal O Fiaich.

Ms. Nic Iolair began by expressing warm appreciation of what she described as the behind-the-scenes role played by the Minister for Foreign Affairs in convincing Scott to recognise the Bunscoil. She explained that the Bunscoil authorities had thought it better not to invite the Minister or a representative to the February opening but hoped that the invitation which had been extended to Tomás Mac Gabhann of Gaelscoileanna would be seen as a sincere and grateful recognition of the Minister's efforts in this regard. (Mr. Mac Gabhann through this national co-ordinating body for Irish-speaking schools had, she said, acted as the Bunscoil's "go-between" with the Minister).

The new prefabricated buildings which now form the Bunscoil are felt by the parents who run the school to be a major improvement on the situation which obtained previously. Inside they appear well-equipped and decorated much as any normal primary school would be (I viewed all the class-rooms from P1 to P7, ages 5 to 11 years). The school surroundings generally and the staff (I was introduced informally, as a friend, by Ms. Nic Iolair to some of the latter in the staff room) certainly impress upon the visitor an unusual degree of commitment, dedication and enthusiasm. It must be said, however, that the actual structures on the site at present are

very basic - of a kind that one would expect as a stop-gap measure for the first few years in a newly-built estate in the Southern context. The Bunscoil has been told by the Northern authorities that it will not be eligible for a capital grant towards a permanent building until at least 1988. (There is currently a one-year suspension on all capital spending on new school buildings in Northern Ireland).

The Bunscoil is a non-denominational school outside the Catholic Diocesan structure although it maintains close links with personnel in the West Belfast Diocesan Committee who have, I was told, been very helpful with advice on dealing with the Northern Department of Education and the Belfast Education and Library Board. Its pupils by virtue of the location and cultural ethos are, of course, in practice overwhelmingly Catholic and religious instruction is provided ("one or two pupils opt out"). At present there are nine teachers and there will be twelve from next September. This year five pupils will "graduate" from the school while eighty will start for the first time giving a school enrolment in September of about 250. Ms. Nic Iolair told me that demand for places at the school is growing rapidly - in just a few years they could actually be in a position where the Bunscoil would be catering for 1,000 pupils. She personally would prefer to set a limit of 500 places for educational and professional reasons and to protect the Irish speaking atmosphere of the school. This demand is being generated by the numbers of children attending the naíonraí or Irish speaking nursery schools. The one attached to the Bunscoil itself, St. Brendans, has 100 children in all, aged 3 - 5 attending it with one "session" in the morning for 50 and an afternoon class for a similar number. Smaller nursery schools catering in each case for numbers roughly in the order of ten to twenty are operating in the Ardoyne, in Twinbrook, in the Short Strand and in the Lower Falls. Ms Nic Iolair spoke of the obvious pressures which will exist in the future for a Meánscoil or Irish speaking secondary school but also strongly doubted whether the kind of parental involvement which has kept the Bunscoil going would be sufficient to establish and maintain a second level school.

She and her husband see the solution to the current demand at the primary tier as being to open a second Bunscoil elsewhere in Belfast which might also be able to attract some pupils from the majority community (some other recent contacts have spoken of initiatives being mooted in this regard). As to the past, a handful of pupils from the Bunscoil continued their Irish-speaking education in Dublin, while I was told that one of the earliest past pupils of the school is now pursuing her degree in Celtic Studies at Queen's University.

The original impetus for the Bunscoil obviously came from the Shaw's Road community itself which was founded in 1960. But today only three of the twelve families resident in that community still have children at the school and the Bunscoil obviously has a much wider catchment area all over West Belfast and indeed attracts pupils too from the nursery schools already mentioned in North and East Belfast. It has a managerial structure involving Trustees (Albert Fry, Fr. B. McMullan, L. Broderick and J. Mitchel), a Board of Governors and a Committee. The latter is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school and as well as parents includes two representatives of the Belfast Education and Library Board and one teacher representative. Ms. Nic Iolair emphasised throughout that an unusual degree of parental involvement, both financially and in terms of time, is still vital to the school's continued existence.

The question of Sinn Féin's influence came up - that organisation attempted to claim some credit at the time for the opening of the buildings in February. Ms Nic Iolair is personally strongly opposed to any political involvement in the running of the school and to Sinn Féin itself. She felt most of the parents would share her position on the former point and recalled that Pat Rice, the Lisburn Sinn Féin Councillor who is a former chairman of the School Committee, had resigned his position on the latter body when elected as a Councillor. She felt that had he not done so he would have been forced to do so by a majority of the parents (her husband was not quite so sure on this point). Inevitably, because of the school's location

some of the parents had Sinn Féin sympathies said Ms. Nic Iolair, but she is satisfied that the school is not subject to political influences and that most of the parents see Sinn Fein's claims to have helped the school for the propaganda that it is.

Ms. Nic Iolair says that generally speaking she is satisfied that, within the terms of maintained status, the Bunscoil is being treated reasonably fairly at the moment. The school is dealt with in the same way as any other maintained primary school by the inspectorate of the Department of Education and an Irish language version of the eleven plus examination is provided for its pupils. Her husband, Seoirse Mac Iolair, in his role as treasurer, did complain that the 85% capital grant had not been applied to two of the classrooms which the parents had provided for the "extension" opened in February. He also spoke of continuing difficulties with the Belfast Education and Library Board in meeting some running costs such as heating, lighting etc. As regards future requirements and additional help which might be made available by the Northern authorities [the Northern Ireland Department of Education (DENI) and the Belfast Library and Education Board (BELB)], the following points were put to me:

Buildings/Land

- The Bunscoil needs space for two extra prefabricated classrooms by September to deal with the aforementioned intake of 80 children. They are negotiating (Kit Napier the Belfast solicitor is apparently acting for them) with the Christian Brothers for the purchase of 2.75 acres of land adjoining their present very confined site (the fact that the site is so confined is also, incidentally, cited by the Belfast Education and Library Board as a difficulty in respect of granting full running costs). The Brothers' land is valued at £65,000 an acre by them but the Department of Education have said that the lands value must be assessed by their valuation office before an 85% grant can be given. There is apparently some delay in this and

if the matter is not resolved quickly the Bunscoil may be forced to use its "Halla Mór" (Assembly Hall) for classrooms in September by dividing it in two. The undersigned inspected the "Halla Mór" and it is, in fact, a very modest general assembly area (for P.E., plays, etc) for the school. It would be a pity if this meagre resource were lost through a delay in facilitating the provision of land for the two extra classrooms immediately needed and for future expansion.

- The Bunscoil have also obviously applied to the authorities for the 85% grant towards the two extra prefabs shortly required and need a quick decision on this for the reason outlined above.
- In the longer term the Bunscoil seeks approval for the planning and construction of a permanent brick-built school on the expanded site. As already indicated the current position of the authorities is that this cannot even be considered before 1988

Naíscóil/Nursery School Attached to the Bunscoil

In October 1985 application was made to the BELB for the granting of maintained status to the Naíscóil/Nursery School (St. Brendan's) of the Bunscoil. This would give the nursery a status similar to that enjoyed by the main school and would relieve the parents of a major burden (currently approximately £22,000 per annum). The Bunscoil has been informed by the BELB that the request for maintained status for the Naíscóil has been passed on to the Northern Department of Education. In support of the application the Bunscoil parents would argue that St. Brendan's is a large feeder nursery (100 infants) where children from English speaking backgrounds attend for between 1¹/₂ to 2 years (from roughly age 3 to 5). During this period they acquire a sufficient standard in the Irish language to enable them to attend the Bunscoil. By September 1986 the Bunscoil hopes to have the Naíscóil housed in accommodation acceptable to the Department (it is currently as already stated

in the "original" Bunscoil hut) and if maintained status could be granted by that time it would be a major boost to the Bunscoil/Naíscoil enterprise as a whole. The preference is for the Naíscoil to be granted maintained status in its own right as an independent nursery but recognition of it as maintained within the Bunscoil would otherwise be welcome. I understand from the Seirse Mac Iolair that it is currently difficult to achieve maintained status for nursery schools because of cutbacks in spending. The Catholic diocesan authorities in West Belfast apparently have a number of such applications for their own nurseries in with DENI at present. However, he told me that his Diocesan contact had wished the Bunscoil "luck" in their application and assured him that the Church authorities would not make a fuss if they managed to "jump the queue" of applications from nursery schools.

Special Equipment

The Bunscoil feels it has a case for special finance (in addition to the normal financing attached to maintained status) to be made available to assist it in the particular circumstances it faces using the Irish language as the medium of instruction. For example, at present the Bunscoil produces its own reading material for pupils which has been developed over the past six years and is printed for them by the Andersonstown News. This material is currently made available by them to the Irish speaking stream at Steelstown School in Derry and would they feel be of use to any new Bunscoileanna. Equipment which would prove invaluable to the school would include the following:

- A large capacity photocopier; a binding machine; a small printing press; a video camera; a cine camera.

They would further welcome grants to publish the material they produce and make it more widely available in Northern Ireland (I would note here that the school library appears to have a good range of the childrens' books and teaching material published in Irish by An Gúm and private sector companies in

the South. However, Irish language enthusiasts generally in Northern Ireland, including the Bunscoil people, appear to regard this material as not fully meeting their needs. The reasons for this are not entirely clear to the undersigned but the Ulster canúint (dialect) is cited as one problem and the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland affecting childrens' standards in Irish as another).

Rates

Seoirse Mac Iolair as Treasurer of the Bunscoil told me that the Northern Department of the Environment is demanding payment of rates for past years. He was not entirely clear himself about the legal position in this regard but apparently through some oversight rates-free status may not have properly sought at some point in the past by the Bunscoil parents. The demand is for approximately £7,000. Clearly the Bunscoil community would appreciate if it were possible to "write this off".

Another Bunscoil for Belfast?

Those involved in the present school at Shaw's Road have an interest both in meeting the perceived demand for Irish language education in the years immediately ahead and in maintaining the standards and particular cultural ethos of the present school. A general view is that this can only be done by setting a limit to the growth of the existing Bunscoil and that a second Bunscoil will accordingly be needed before too long. Given what is seen as the "long fight" to achieve maintained status for the Shaw's Road school it was put to me that anything that could be done to "short-circuit" DENI "red-tape" in permitting the establishment of a second Bunscoil would benefit education through the medium of the Irish language generally in Belfast.

The visit to the Bunscoil was, of course, on the basis of complete confidentiality and conducted on an informal basis throughout. Both Ms Nic Iolair and her husband welcomed the

contact and, while emphasising that the Bunscoil was flourishing through the determined efforts of parents and teachers over the years, obviously spent some time explaining current and future desiderata. The Principal explained that they received many interested visitors at the school and were attracting increasing media attention. However, in view of the Minister's past interest, she particularly welcomed the present contact. The emphasis of the discussion was, of course, on what might be done for the Bunscoil by the authorities in Northern Ireland in the context of the cultural dimension to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, Seoirse Mac Iolair did offer (without encouragement!) some suggestions as to assistance which he felt might be given by the Irish Government to the Bunscoil. Briefly these were as follows:

- A grant could be given to cover (or assist towards) the contribution which the hard-pressed parents will otherwise have to raise (over the years the Bunscoil has raised funds through collections, céilís, raffles etc.) towards purchase of the land from the Christian Brothers. This would be something in the order of 15% of the cost of purchasing 2.75 acres at £65,000 an acre, i.e about £27,000 (The balance of 85% is being sought in the maintained status context from DENI). Such a grant could be paid directly to the Christian Brothers if preferred said Mac Iolair.

- A small amount of money has been channelled through the Northern branch of Conradh na Gaeilge, Comhaltas Uladh, to the Bunscoil. This money is assumed to originate in Roinn na Gaeltachta but according to Seoirse Mac Iolair the precise amount and indeed the question of future funding is subject to decision by committees within the Conradh and the Comhaltas. He feels this money should be more specifically earmarked for the Bunscoil and what he sees as the uncertainty about this funding should be removed. (The points he made in this connection and whether his comments are accurate will be followed up with the Roinn).

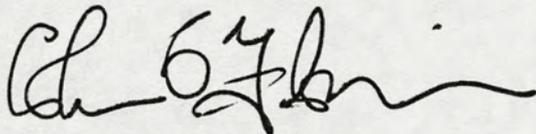
- An Austrian charity is providing the St. Brendan's Naíscóil with a wooden building to replace the hut currently in use. This will be delivered to Belfast next month free of charge. However, the Bunscoil people will have to provide the money to assemble this structure and provide a concrete floor, additional roofing, plumbing, wiring, landscaping etc. The total cost to the Bunscoil is estimated at £20,000. Again an tUas Mac Iolair said that a grant from the Government would be welcome. (Such a grant could be paid direct to the Bunscoil's Allied Irish bank account).

- Another way in which the Government could financially contribute to the Bunscoil would be to pay a sum (Mac Iolair mentioned £100,000) directly to the Trustees for use as a general reserve or to settle the outstanding bank loan in respect of the recently furnished prefab buildings. Such a general once-off grant would be, said Mac Iolair, a recognition by the Government of Ireland of the work undertaken by the parents since 1971 in furthering the education of children in Belfast through the Irish language.

Mr. Mac Iolair as treasurer of the Bunscoil is obviously preoccupied with its financial affairs. I made it clear to him that I was not in any position to respond to his suggestions all of which would involve a financial contribution by the Government to a school in Northern Ireland. I recalled that the main focus of the conversation with himself and his wife had been the situation and the needs of the Bunscoil in the context of provision by the Northern Ireland authorities. We could, of course, under the Anglo-Irish Agreement put forward views and proposals on matters affecting the cultural identity of the minority and indeed, as was publicly known, the Minister had done so already at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference in January.

I should perhaps add that the visit to the Bunscoil took place in a very positive atmosphere and Mr. Mac Iolair's suggestions for financing by the Irish Government in no way detracted from

this or from the main focus of our discussion already referred to. The overall approach of the Principal, Aine Nic Iolair, struck me as essentially pragmatic in an environment where enthusiasm and commitment obviously abound.



Colm O Floinn,

21 May 1986.

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