



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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JOINT RECORD OF EXCHANGES AT IRISH INITIATIVE

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Statement of issues: The Irish language in Northern  
Ireland (document)

Relevant Article: 5

Action Taken:

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JH.

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Mr Mc Carthy  
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## The Irish Language in Northern Ireland

1. The Irish language is central to the identity and tradition of Irish nationalists and thus involves rights and objectives espoused by the Anglo-Irish Agreement e.g.

(The two Governments) "..... recognising the need for continuing efforts ..... to acknowledge the rights of the two major traditions (Preamble)

"Recognising and respecting the identities of the two communities in Northern Ireland (Preamble)

"The Conference shall be a framework .... (i) for the accomodation of the rights and identities of the two traditions which exist in Northern Ireland ..... (Article 4),

"The Conference shall concern itself with measures to recognise and accommodate the rights and identities of the two traditions in Northern Ireland... Matters to be considered in this area include measures to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions."

2. The Irish Joint Chairman, concerned that nationalists in Northern Ireland have felt that this vital aspect of their identity has been insufficiently recognised, respected and accomodated, will put forward views and proposals designed to give effect to the objectives of the Agreement in this area.
3. Speedy action in four specific areas could and should be taken which would bring about an improvement in the existing situation.

These are:

- (a) Placenames
- (b) ~~The use of the Irish language in official business.~~
- (c) Arrangements for the 1991 Census
- (d) Irish language publications, cultural events etc.

(a) Placenames

4. Under Chapter 21, Section 19, Sub-section (4) of the Northern Ireland Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1949 (see attached), street names can be "put up or painted" in the English language only. This legislation was specifically intended to accomodate one identity at the expense of the other. Quite apart from the rights involved, the fact is that most of the placenames of Northern Ireland (many of them of immemorial antiquity), are Irish in their linguistic origin. Their "meaning" mythological, historical and cultural - can thus only be elicited and appreciated by reference to their original Irish language form.

Action proposed

5. The relevant section of the 1949 Act should be repealed and replaced by a provision which would entitle the residents of a defined district, housing estate or street, to decide by an appropriate majority, to have street names etc. displayed in the Irish as well as the English language. Local referenda could be held to arrange for this along the lines practiced in Switzerland, or as in the case of Wales those relating to Sunday drinking.

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Ireland.  
(LRA Act, 1946)  
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6. It is proposed that the appropriate authority (Department of the Environment?) issue a list of the placenames in Northern

Ireland giving the original Irish as well as the English forms and that all the relevant Northern Ireland authorities (e.g. the Courts, the Post Office and the various licencing authorities) be authorised to acknowledge both the Irish and English language forms of placenames in their dealings with the public. The appropriate authority in Dublin, An Coimisiun Logainmneacha (The Placenames Commission), will be in a position to provide assistance to this work as appropriate. The principle of acknowledging both traditions should also be observed in the case of Government road signs. Major Government information publications should, in pursuance of the Agreement, indicate at least once in the text (e.g., in the case of the Ulster Year Book, in a map), the Irish form as well as the English approximate of placenames of Irish origin.

(b) Use of Irish language in official business

7. Irish as a language has hitherto had little more official status in Northern Ireland than languages such as French or Spanish. This is resented by nationalists and, as is well known, creates opportunities for subversive organisations to "appropriate" the Irish language, the fundamental symbol of nationalist identity.

Action proposed

8. Provision should be made for those wishing to do so to make use of the Irish language in transacting official business as is the case in the South. In Wales people have the right to use the Welsh language in the conduct of official and public business. Furthermore Welsh can be used in legal proceedings in Wales.

The appropriate legal model is the Welsh Language Act, 1967 and a similar Act should be introduced relating to the use of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government would be willing to help in any appropriate way, based on our own experience, in framing such a measure.

(c) 1991 Census

- 9. We understand that the NIO does not have accurate statistical information on the number of persons in Northern Ireland who profess to have a knowledge of the Irish language. It would seem to be useful, for the purposes of educational and cultural policy, that such information should be available.

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Action Proposed

- 10. An appropriately framed question should be included in the 1991 Census which would establish this information.

(d) Support for Irish language publications, cultural events etc.

- 11. As we understand it, existing support comes from the Northern Ireland Arts Council and, as such, is judged centrally on the criterion of artistic merit, rather than in terms of the larger objective of accomodating the nationalist identity in this area.

Action proposed

- 12. That an appropriate authority be established to provide adequate support in this area with terms of reference which reflect the objectives of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. (Note: the Unionist Party document, "The Way Forward", contains proposals which are generally along these lines).