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Reference Code:	2018/28/2168
Creation Dates:	19 October 1988
Extent and medium:	2 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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Meeting with Gael-Linn Officials

I was invited to lunch on 19 October by the Chairman of Gael-Linn, Mr. Donall O Moráin and the newly appointed Chief Executive, Mr. Briain MacAongusa.

They said that their main purpose in talking to me was to express their anxiety over the new education reform proposals published by the Northern Ireland Department of Education. They held that the new proposals were no better than those circulated last March and that the overall position of Irish in the curriculum had deteriorated by comparison with the system in operation in the North since 1920. Irish now had to compete with a continental European language which had to be taken by pupils as a compulsory subject whereas Irish could only be an additional option. I put it to them that while we were still not fully satisfied with the position given to Irish, it was nevertheless an improvement over the March proposals. Irish now had an official standing and it was very much a matter for individual schools (and their pupils) as to the precise curricular time and prominence that should be given to it. I also indicated that there were many who felt with some justification that no child should leave school without at least some knowledge of a continental language given the proximity of 1992 and all that that implied.

I agreed fully, however, with their contention that Education Minister Brian Mawhinney had been most misleading in his suggestion that Irish had now been given a standing similar to that of the Welsh language in Wales. It was pointed out that Welsh would be a compulsory subject in all schools in Wales unless permission was given to a school to opt out; in Northern Ireland the position would be quite different since Irish would be taught only in those schools which would voluntarily decide to opt for it. They argued that Mr. Mawhinney was thoroughly unionist in his approach and that no sympathy could be expected from him for the Irish language. They wondered, however, if more pressure could be put on Tom King, who they felt was much more sympathetic in this regard. I indicated that the matter had

● already been raised directly with Mr. King in the context of the Anglo-Irish Conference but that it could not be expected that the Secretary of State himself would become involved in the minutiae of the new proposals. I suggested that the new proposals should be seen in the light of our representations under the Anglo-Irish Agreement and that the information available to us was that the SDLP and most nationalists in the North had given a guarded welcome to them as at least a step in the right direction. I pointed out that the new elements in the curriculum regarding cultural heritage and education for mutual understanding which would be applied in all schools had the potential to make a very positive impact for cross-community awareness and reconciliation. They accepted this wholeheartedly and expressed the view that some of the old prejudices against the Irish language and national culture in general in the North were already breaking down.

They indicated that one of their main worries was that the failure of the Northern authorities to provide sufficient opportunity and encouragement for the teaching of Irish would give a ready-made opportunity to IRA-inspired elements to hijack the language. I replied that this was an aspect which we fully recognised and that we had conveyed this view to the Northern authorities. They enquired if any assistance in promoting the language in Northern Ireland might be forthcoming from Stormont or from bodies such as the International Fund. I indicated that the Fund might be a possibility and suggested that any projects they might propose would be most likely to succeed if situated in the context of cross-community reconciliation. They responded favourably to this suggestion and said that they already had some ideas which they would consider putting forward.

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20 October 1988

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