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SDLP Conference on Lesser-Used Languages

A conference on lesser-used languages in the EEC was organised by the SDLP in the Mourne Country Hotel, Newry, on 22 October 1988 under the auspices of the European Parliament. The organisation of the conference was extremely professional with simultaneous translation into three languages and an attendance of approximately 150 people.

The conference was opened by Seamus Mallon, who pointed out that people in Ireland had a great deal to learn from both the successes and failures of the lesser-used languages in other parts of Europe. There followed talks by representatives of the Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Basque, Friesian and Catalan languages. Participants were particularly impressed by the achievements of the Welsh language movement and the amount of financial backing it received from the British Government. They noted with enthusiasm that Welsh was to become a compulsory subject in all Welsh schools under the Baker education reform Bill. The Scottish representative (a Director of Comunn na Gaidhlig) had fewer achievements to report but was pleased that his language was gaining increased official recognition; he remarked to me afterwards that people from Gaeltacht districts in Ireland and Scotland should cooperate more closely together in relation to industrial development and economic regeneration since the two areas had a great deal in common and could learn a lot from each other. He also felt that the Gaeltachts should be less dependent on multinational companies for management and financial support of new projects.

The main emphasis of the conference was, however, on the Irish language and the entire afternoon session was given over to this topic and in particular its role in the Northern Ireland context. Much dissatisfaction was expressed over the unsatisfactory status given to Irish in the Northern Ireland broadcasting services and in the Mawhinney education reform proposals.

In a key-note address, John Hume looked at the wider European context and pointed out that there were 30 million citizens of the EEC who spoke a lesser-used language. He believed that the European Community provided a favourable environment for such languages to develop and stressed that the European Parliament was particularly active in this regard. He said that Irish must not be seen simply in its insular context in which it would inevitably be dominated by English but should be accepted in its wider European context where it had a distinct regional significance. He said that what people should be aiming for was not a Europe of nation states - the majority of whom were old imperialist powers - but a Europe of regions, a process of development which would become more feasible as European institutions became more democratically orientated.

An important element of John Hume's speech was his call for the holding of an EEC conference comprising representatives of both national and regional governments to discuss the question of lesser-used languages in Europe. He suggested that the initial conference should be hosted by the Irish Government since Ireland was one of only two countries in the EEC (the other being Luxembourg) in which the national language was not the mother-tongue of the majority of the people. He believed that other language regions would be very happy to host future conferences. (In conversation afterwards, John Hume told me that he had already raised this idea with the Taoiseach who, he said, had responded favourably to the proposition).



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24 October 19

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