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Education / Irish Language

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Niall Holohan,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
80 St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN. 2.

2, December, 1988.

Dear Niall,

In regard to the Maryfield meeting on the Mawhinney Education Proposals, I enclose a copy of document recently received in the Department which was prepared by Phil Stíobhard and Mícheál O Máirtín, professors in St. Mary's College of Education, Belfast.

Yours sincerely,

Brendan Meehan

Assistant Secretary.

IRISH IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM:
THE WAY FORWARD?

Irish in the education system: the way forward?

The present system

1. Under the present education system Irish is taught in both primary and secondary schools. In a number of secondary schools it is studied together with a modern continental language, but pupils may opt to take either Irish or a modern language. In other schools it is the only language offered. After French, it is the most popular second language taught in Northern Ireland secondary schools.

2. In April 1984 maintained status was granted to one Irish-medium primary school in Belfast while an Irish stream in Steelstown, Derry, has been granted similar aid. In 1987 a second Irish-medium primary school was established in Belfast but as yet no representative of the Department of Education (DENI) has met with the school authorities to discuss their position with them. It seems that Irish-medium education has to prove its viability and that the parents of children receiving such education are being expected to carry heavy financial burden to secure it for their children, while other groups promoting integrated education are being allowed 100% funding without having to prove their viability. This seems unjustified in light of the fact that Irish-medium education carries with it the spirit of integration.

3. *Primary* Although the teaching of Irish has had a long and successful tradition in English-medium schools, the exact position of the language in these schools is difficult to ascertain, and is determined by staff competence and interest in the subject. In reply to a questionnaire sent to some 600 voluntary maintained schools 80% indicated their willingness to teach Irish if proper guidelines and support were forthcoming from the Department of Education.
These results compare favourably with findings contained in the special projects report entitled *Regional broadcasts and Irish language teaching in Northern Ireland*, issued by BBC (NI) in

1987. Researchers established that up to 37% of primary schools across the religious divide expressed an interest in teaching Irish in the future. This has prompted BBC (NI) to take the positive step of producing Irish language radio programmes geared towards primary pupils.

4. Further evidence of the interest in Irish is supplied in the survey conducted by the Government's own Policy Planning and Research Unit which is contained in the paper *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland 1987* (occasional paper no. 17) which states:

"the results do however point to the fact that the Irish language is known, is of interest and is considered important by a substantial proportion of the Catholic community and particularly the younger members"

5. Irish is offered in schools because of its cultural, educational, and linguistic value. For many people in Northern Ireland it is the most important part of their cultural heritage. This fact is explicitly acknowledged by DENI in its *Primary education - teachers' guide* (1974), where the cultural and educational value of the language is detailed.

6. There is obviously scope for much improvement in the present system. Teacher support, including in-service training, the production of texts and teaching resources, is badly needed. The position of Irish in our primary schools needs to be addressed and support must be provided for the schools that wish to offer Irish.

7. Yet despite its evident shortcomings, this system at least affords pupils the opportunity of learning Irish at some stage of their education, and schools are free to offer it without compulsion or pressure. Pupils may choose to study Irish alone, in combination with another language, or to ignore it completely.

Current decisions outlined in *The Way Forward*

8. The position of Irish in Education in Northern Ireland - proposals for reform, the Government's first document (March 1988), drew widespread criticism from educationalists, politicians, and cultural bodies. The omission of the language from the list of 'foundation subjects', its omission from the curriculum of primary schools, the failure to recognise the existence of Irish-medium schools, and the stipulation that Irish could be taken only with another language were highly objectionable, and were perceived to downgrade Irish in the education system.

9. Acknowledging the criticisms drawn by the first document, Dr Mawhinney sought to address the problem in *The Way Forward*, his new set of proposals, (October 1988). Stating that the Government 'fully recognises the importance of the Irish language to many people in Northern Ireland' (p.7), he conceded that a programme of study would be drawn up for Irish in those schools (currently at primary level only) which teach through the medium of that language, and that pupils could be formally assessed in Irish.

10. The granting of what most would consider to be a basic right was the only concession made by the Minister in this document. The stipulation that, in order to study Irish second-level students must also take another language, remains as Government policy.
Not only were the other deeply-felt fears and grievances regarding the future of Irish not acknowledged, but further detrimental measures are to be introduced. The position of the Irish language in English-medium primary schools has been completely ignored. Paragraph 2.10 of the current document points out (in capital letters) that language studies are NOT APPLICABLE. This will be seen by many as a clear-cut attack on primary schools which teach Irish and is particularly offensive

This rejection of a role for Irish at primary level reflects a negative attitude towards language acquisition considering that the teaching of a second or even a third language at this level is accepted practice in many parts of the world and in particular in the education systems of our nearest European neighbours with whom we will have even closer ties after 1992

11. The position of Irish is thus being seriously threatened. It has been totally rejected as an area of study for the vast majority of primary pupils and, moreover, the choice which second-level pupils and schools have hitherto been able to exercise in relation to Irish will be severely restricted. If pupils wish to study only one language, then they may take French, German or Spanish, but not Irish. Secondary schools which have hitherto offered only Irish will now be forced to change to a different language or to find the extra time in an already crowded curriculum to teach Irish.

While many secondary schools by dint of imaginative timetabling and curriculum organisation will doubtless continue to offer both Irish and a modern continental language, some schools could be pressurised into abandoning Irish completely.

C

Welsh

12. In introducing his proposals the Minister stated (p. 7) that the position of Irish would be analogous to that enjoyed by the Welsh language in Wales. This is not true. Under the Welsh system, all pupils in both the Welsh-speaking and the anglicised areas of Wales *must take Welsh* from the ages of 5 to 16 years, and a major European language also has to be studied from the age of 11 onwards. Welsh is no way inferior to French, German, Spanish or any other language, but

in is accorded its proper status. This is clearly quite different to what is being proposed for Irish in Northern Ireland.

13. The position of Welsh in Wales contrasts sharply in most respects with that of Irish in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Wales, Mr Walker, has on a number of occasions stressed the importance of the Welsh language to Wales. At a press conference in July 1988, for instance, Mr Walker said:

"Only one in five Welshmen enjoy this fine inheritance at the present time. Our aim is to give the 80% who are English-speaking Welshmen the opportunity to learn Welsh so that they and their children can reap the benefits of a rich and historic language"

and further:

"The Government and the new educational reforms have given a high priority to the Welsh language and for the first time the language has a statutory support that will guarantee a wider teaching of Welsh within the Principality"

(Statement by the Secretary of State for Wales, Mr Peter Walker, at a press conference at the Welsh Office, Cardiff, on Wednesday, July 20 1988)

These are no hollow sentiments, but are backed by affirmative action on the part of the Government. Full support is given for the provision of textbooks, tapes, videos, and other resource material. In-service training is provided for teachers, language advisors are appointed, and research on teachers' needs and on planning is conducted in language resource centres and planning units.

14. It is quite clear that the positive attitude of the Secretary of State for Wales to Welsh, stands in contrast to Dr Mawhinney's attitude to Irish. Only after sustained criticism of the first set of proposals was the importance of Irish to many people in Northern Ireland even acknowledged.

This is simply not good enough. Irish is just as important to us here as Welsh is in Wales, and should be treated accordingly.

D ; *Alternative proposals*

15. We therefore call on the Government to alter these discriminatory decisions and to adopt the same attitude towards Irish as it has towards Welsh. The following steps must be taken:
- (a) Irish must be recognised as an optional subject in the primary schools curriculum
 - (b) Irish must be elevated to the same status as French, German, and Spanish. Students must be free to choose any one of these, or to study two (or more) in combination or sequentially to satisfy the requirement for language studies
 - (c) Full support for the teaching of Irish, at both primary and secondary level, on a par with that available for Welsh, must be provided.
16. In making these proposals we wish to ensure that all pupils are given a fair opportunity to learn Irish, and that the language is not discriminated against. Our proposals would allow pupils to study Irish in combination with another language, to take Irish on its own, or to ignore it completely if they so wish.
- We fully recognise the importance of learning the major European languages and by no means wish to deny our children the opportunity of doing so. We feel, however, that this opportunity need not and must not be made available through downgrading Irish.
- We are ultimately faced with a question of ethos. This is Ireland, and Irish is a central part of our cultural heritage. It is not an exotic language studied for obscure reasons. The proposals made by the Minister seek to impose on Northern Ireland an educational ethos which reflects the culture of the English Home Counties. This is something we will not accept.