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6 October 1988

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Meeting on Education Proposals

The Secretariat was briefed on 4 October in relation to the announcement the following day of proposals on the adaptation of the Baker educational reforms in England and Wales to Northern Ireland. The briefing was to consider the response by the Minister for Education, Mr. Mawhinney, to submissions received over the past few months following the publication of an initial paper on the adaptation of these educational reforms to Northern Ireland. The Irish side was led by Joint Secretary O hUiginn. He was accompanied by the undersigned and by Mr. Gaffey of the Secretariat. The British side was led by the Under Secretary at the Central Secretariat, Mr. Ronnie Spence. He was accompanied by Mr. D. Hill and Mr. D. Woods of the Department of Education and by Mr. T. Canavan of the British side of the Secretariat.

The major changes of interest made by the Minister, following the consultation period, are as follows:

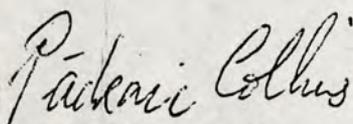
- he has moved away from the idea applicable in England and Wales, that is, a system of foundation subjects which left no option to schools as regards subjects for study in the time allocated to these foundation subjects. This has now been replaced with a system of six broad areas of study within which certain subjects will be compulsory but which leaves a deal of flexibility in relation to other subjects which can be studied. While there is undoubtedly a considerable element of flexibility involved in the new proposals, it is also certain that the compulsory subjects would be expected to take up from 65-70% of school time
- formal assessment of pupils will now take place at ages 8, (instead of 7 as previously proposed), 11, 14 and 16.

- attainment targets, a programme of study and assessment criteria will now apply to the Irish language which may be taken as an additional modern language. In that sense, Irish has been given a better position than in the original proposals where it was lumped together with foreign languages generally. The position now accorded to Irish is roughly that accorded to the teaching of Welsh. Language studies is a compulsory area of study but Irish alone would not meet the requirement to study languages. This is also the position in Wales.
- religious education will be a compulsory part of the curriculum in all schools in addition to the six broad areas of study.
 - the proposal in the consultation paper to provide a category of Grant Maintained Schools has been dropped. The original proposal for Grant Maintained Status provided that parents could initiate the procedures for a change of status and these schools would operate with a high degree of autonomy and would be funded directly by central government. It was a proposal, we understand, which had been objected to by all denominations in Northern Ireland. The proposal for Grant Maintained Integrated Status has, however, been maintained and in fact a range of additional measures in support of integrated education will be associated with it.

It is fair to say that the new proposals are a considerable improvement on those set out in the initial consultative paper. We would, however, have preferred if there had been an element of support for the establishment of a secondary school teaching through the medium of Irish. It would have been a logical development, given the success of the Bunscoil in Belfast. The British side informed us that, while the primary level experiments in teaching through the medium of Irish were proving successful, there were no plans at present to encourage an extension of this to the secondary level. We added that we would wish to give the proposals further consideration before communicating a definitive view.

The public reaction to the new proposals has been, generally, one of welcome. There has been some criticism from the DUP about the assistance to integrated education and some nationalist spokesmen are unhappy that Irish cannot be taken on its own and qualify as a compulsory subject in the language studies area. Nevertheless, the proposals must be viewed as a significant step forward when compared with the proposals in the initial consultative paper. A more detailed report is attached.

Yours sincerely



Padraic Collins