

NIO have already engaged people to conduct ceremonies.
Lord O'Neel?



Linda Devlin

16/10/2003 16:52

To: Ken Fraser/OFMDFM/DFP@DFP
Subject: Re: CITIZENSHIP CEREMONIES CONSULTATION DOCUMENT:
25 JULY 2003

Ken

Issue over costs. * Simulation day with NIO attendees! Can't bring cameras!

Thank you for this. The main thrust of the consultation document is to encourage ideas and suggestions as to how citizenship ceremonies should be tailored to suit local circumstances. Both the NIO and the Home Office are very alive to the sensitivities of Northern Ireland and willing to work around these, as far as possible recognising that this is an excepted matter and therefore the responsibility of the Home Secretary. I am happy to pass your note to both departments. Indeed, there is a meeting tomorrow at 10am in the VCR in Castle Buildings to discuss the practicalities of the ceremonies in NI and you would be welcome to attend to contribute to the development of proposals.

Linda

Ken Fraser

Ken Fraser

16/10/2003 15:12

To: Linda Devlin/OFMDFM/DFP@DFP
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Subject: CITIZENSHIP CEREMONIES CONSULTATION DOCUMENT: 25 JULY 2003

Linda,

Gerry 'phoned you a wee while ago to express some of the concerns that we have about the Home Office proposals for a citizenship ceremony and how they might play in NI. As the consultation is about to close, I thought that I should let you have a note of my worries.

I understand that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister "signed up to the policy" when they were still in situ, although it is not clear to me whether they actually signed up to the specifics set out in the consultation document.

It seems to me sensible that I register the qualms we have about what is proposed. These views are informed by representations made to us by minority ethnic people and others.

Ceremony procedure (language)

The consultation document states "Before they can be granted citizenship, all applicants will be required to have sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic".

The exclusion of Irish from this list seems puzzling and would seem difficult to justify, particularly in light of the following provisions of the GF/Belfast Agreement concerning the Irish language:

"the British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language,

where appropriate and where people so desire it:

- *take resolute action to promote the language;*
- *facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand;*
- *seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language;"*

There is also a case to be made for the inclusion of Ulster-Scots based on the Agreement (and the parity of esteem provisions in it).

Ceremony procedure (national features)

The consultation document states that the Government believes that it would be right to agree that elements such as national symbols and the national anthem should feature in the ceremony on the grounds that they feature in ceremonies mounted by other countries and that "many people in the UK and many of those becoming citizens would expect to see the same here". The evidence to back up this statement is mentioned. It seems unlikely, however, that the same could be said of Northern Ireland.

UK national symbols and national anthem – which are proposed as an integral part of the ceremony - are associated primarily, if not exclusively with the Unionist community, as is much of the language proposed for the ceremony. The proposed use of the Union flag (mentioned in a question posed in the consultation document) and national anthem would appear to be at odds with the sustained attempt – by Government and others - to remove emblems from the political arena within NI. It is difficult to reconcile these proposals with, for example, paragraph 31 of the Joint Declaration:

"In the Agreement, the participants recognised that the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes was a sensitive issue and that there was a need, in particular in creating new institutions, to ensure that they were used in a manner that promoted mutual respect rather than division"

The citizenship ceremony is to be a new, and public, institution. It is difficult to see how the ceremony itself (which is intended to be compulsory) and the use of symbols and emblems as proposed in the consultation document will promote mutual respect.

I understand, however, - notwithstanding what it says in the consultation document - that the Northern Ireland Office has "agreed that such ceremonies will only occur in Hillsborough and have agreed that Registrars from England will perform the task."

This *de facto* acknowledgement that circumstances are different in Northern Ireland – and not just in respect of local government structures – is to be

welcomed. NIO's wish to keep citizenship ceremonies in NI low key is understandable, given the segregated nature of NI society, but the arrangements that they propose for NI seem to be entirely at odds with the proposals which are explicitly aimed at making the citizenship ceremony a "community occasion".

Standard Citizenship Ceremony

The standard citizenship ceremony proposed in the consultation document talks of "full membership of the British family". This sounds distinctly odd in the NI context, where a substantial proportion of existing citizens do not conceive of themselves as forming a part of the "British family".

The proposed pledge - "I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a citizen" - would not be acceptable to a significant proportion of the current "citizens" of Northern Ireland - a fact that is explicitly acknowledged and taken account of by the Government, in, for example, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Joint Declaration. It seems unfair and potentially discriminatory to set the bar higher for people who have not been born here (ie to demand something of them that you are not going to demand of those already holding "citizenship").

The proposals in the consultation document have the potential to damage community and race relations in NI. It is difficult to see the NIO's/Home Office's agreement that ceremonies will only occur in Hillsborough and that Registrars from England will perform the task as amounting to anything other than a tacit acknowledgement of this.

In the circumstances, rather than to insist that the proposals apply UK wide, it might be wiser to accept that circumstances in NI are such that there is more to lose than to gain here.

It is difficult to envisage a "neutral" ceremony that had any sort of meaning that would not give rise to controversy, with attendant damage to community relations.

The proposals propose a provision that: "There will be discretion to exempt people from this requirement [to attend a citizenship ceremony] in exceptional circumstances". The exceptional circumstances envisaged are disability or infirmity. It might be better all round if there was acknowledgement that exceptional circumstances prevail in Northern Ireland and to allow a block exemption from compulsory attendance.

I hope that you might pass these concerns on to the NIO or the Home Office (as appropriate). I would be very happy to discuss - or expand on - them with you or others if that would be helpful.

Ken Fraser