

FR.

RBS 162/12.

Miss Elliott

cc: PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott
Mr Spence
Mr Green, DENI
Mr Warburton, DOE
Mr Blackwell

THE POSITION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

May I offer a couple of observations on the draft submission circulated under cover of your note of 18 December to Mr Spence.

First, I am not sure what is the timescale you envisage for the putting of your submission to the Secretary of State after PCC has considered a draft on 7 January. But it seems quite likely that, especially if the final text is not agreed until late January, then the Republic may well be in the throes of a general election from which Mr Haughey and a Fianna Fail administration may emerge victorious. This could affect our approach to a range of policy issues (see, for example, my submission of 16 December - not to all) - including the Irish language. Your submission is not the place to explore the various options at length, but you nevertheless may wish to remind Ministers of the possibility (to put it no higher) of a change of Government in Dublin and the fact that we might be unwise to commit ourselves irrevocably to any particular course of action, or finalise our tactics before we know what messages will be coming out of Dublin in the new year.

Second, this may be a convenient opportunity to draw attention to a possible weakness in our approach to policy formation (and presentation) on matters where we know the Irish Government/SDLP have strong views.* There is a school of thought that

* A general point on which I hope to comment further in the new year.

E.R.

argues that our policies should concentrate on what unites people in Northern Ireland rather than what divides: this approach, for instance, appears implicit in the emphasis your submission lays at times on apparently divisive aspects of our Irish language policies. The desire to promote consensus is, of course, unexceptionable and lies at the heart of our wider political strategies in Northern Ireland. But it is a principle that needs looking at with particular care. For we are committed, under the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to recognising and respecting the identities of the two communities in Northern Ireland. This will sometimes mean, not accidentally, but as one of the essential features of our policies, that we espouse measures that the other lot may not like. That "not liking" must not count as a knockdown argument against never doing such things - even though prudent government will always involve weighing, in the case of any particular measure, whether the reaction in the other community or the expense means that the benefits of the proposed measure are outweighed by these wider costs. Irish street names seem to me a case in point: there seems, to me at least, no compelling reason, apart from minor expense, in not permitting people who actually want to call their street ^(eq) "Bothar na Bhfal" to do so except cowardice in the face of intolerance and bigotry. (I hope I do not need to explain that I am not attributing this to your draft.)

Nor do I suggest that you ought to explore these issues in your draft. Nevertheless, you may be reluctant to lose the opportunity this submission offers to remind likely recipients of our commitment to respect both identities in Northern Ireland - sometimes even at the cost of being "divisive" in the short run. In the longer run, of course, it is our hope that policies of "equal recognition" will bring both parts of a divided society more closely together on a basis of "mutual recognition and acceptance of each other's rights".

Nollaig shona dhuit.

P N Bell

P N BELL

22 December 1986