

E. R.

CONFIDENTIAL

PS/74/87/SW

RBS/20/2

cc PS/Mr Scott (B&L) M
Mr Chesterton M
Mr Elliott
Mr Bell M
Mr Kirk M
Mr Hewitt

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Mr Spence

OFFICIAL BUSINESS IN IRISH

Sean MacMathuna, the Secretary of the Gaelic League has written to Mr Scott and to Mr Barry recently complaining on behalf of a Mr Martin O'Muilleoir. Mr O'Muilleoir alleges that when visiting Eoghan MacCormak a prisoner at the Maze, a Prison Officer insulted him by saying that Irish was a foreign and "Mickey mouse language". Mr MacMathuna wrote in Irish and in accordance with Central Secretariat guidelines, PS/Mr Scott wrote back asking him to provide an English translation.

2. You have in the past explained to the Irish side of the Secretariat our reasons for refusing to conduct official business in Irish, but the Irish have made strong representations to me on this issue, and have asked that their views be forwarded again.

3. I must confess that on this matter I do think they have some justification. I quite accept that it would be unrealistic and unnecessary for Government Departments to conduct their business in Irish, but to ask people who write official letters in Irish to provide an English translation is I believe insensitive and causes avoidable offence. It must be possible to have such letters translated quickly and accurately within Government Departments and to respond in English. Every department holds information centrally on the linguistic skills of staff and even if a Department is unable to trace a fluent Irish speaker from their own staff the DENI Inspectorate has always provided a translation service. If the letter proves to be malicious or mischievous, then it can be dealt with in the same way as such correspondence is in English.

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4. This would I believe be a simple procedural change which would avoid offending genuine Irish speakers, and at the same time would deprive the Sinn Fein Language activists of a stick with which to beat the Administration.

5. It would also accord Irish speakers the same courtesy as that given to French or German speakers who write to Departments. While the numbers involved would not of course be comparable, nevertheless the number of people who wish to write in Irish must be quite small and is accordingly our justification for rejecting many of the other suggestions made by the Irish on the use of their language.

6. I appreciate that this matter has been considered in some detail, but I hope that as we are considering our further response to the Irish on the outstanding Irish Language issues that it might be re-considered.

Principal Secretariat
12 February 1987

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