

FROM: MR J A CANAVAN
CCRU
DATE: 11 MAY 1995

cc PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Williams - B
Mr Peover
Mr Morrow
Ms Beattie

ASST/ SEC
TC 13415
12 May 1995
G.C.R.U.

In Case 12.5
Excellent draft. if
I may say so.

ms logan 15/5
also on Min Case

TO: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L) - B¹.c

UNDER SEC 487/5
7 MAY 1995
CENT SEC

SOS/00266/95 - LETTER FROM COUNCILLOR M O MUILLEOIR AND OTHERS

Councillor O Mulleoir has followed his previous correspondence on a British Government translation of the Framework Document with a letter of complaint about the Government's general attitude to the Irish language, which has been signed by eight leading Irish language activists.

Their letter has been translated from the Irish and its general tone is rebarbative. It perpetuates many of the errors of logic found in the extreme wing of the Irish language movement - the assumption that the interests of Irish users and the nationalist tradition are coterminous; the idea that the rights of Irish users can only receive full recognition through a bilingual administration.

The attached draft provides a firm rebuttal, justified by the tone of Councillor O Muilleoir's letter. There are a number of points which it is important to get across. For instance, the Government is not contemplating bilingualism in the public sector (we can expect to hear more of the

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Welsh parallel in this respect). The Irish language movement does not exist in isolation from the rest of society and its adoption of extreme positions runs the risk of turning the language into an instrument of division, rather than of reconciliation between nationalists and unionists.

(Signed:- JAC)

J A CANAVAN

TC/1857/RD

DRAFT

Councillor Mairtin O' Muilleoir
An Chulturlann
216 Falls Road
BELFAST
BT12

May 1995

Thank you for your letter of 13 April to the Secretary of State on the Government's Irish language policy, which you signed together with nine leading figures in the Irish language movement.

The Government recognises that the Irish language is perceived by many people in Northern Ireland as an important part of their cultural heritage. It seeks to respect the special importance of Irish, encourage interest in it and appreciation of it, and highlight its contribution to the cultural heritage of the whole community. The Government is anxious to remove structural barriers to the use of the language by those who wish to do so, such as the recently repealed 1949 legislation on Street Names.

In practical terms, this translates into a willingness to respond positively to soundly based requests for assistance. Approximately £1.7 million of Government expenditure is directed towards projects with an Irish language dimension, including full grant aid to three Irish language primary schools. Several of your co-signatories are linked to organisations which have benefited from such financial assistance. All of this, in

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the Government's view, reflects a parity of esteem between the cultural traditions of the two main sections of the community.

However, parity of esteem need not translate into identical treatment for the users of the English and Irish languages. Your letter does not address the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population in Northern Ireland, including many nationalists as well as almost all unionists, have a knowledge of English only. Enforcing bilingualism upon the public sector, which is what your penultimate paragraph amounts to, is neither desirable nor practical. Nor would it be justifiable to provide services to Irish users without regard for value for money or normal administrative criteria.

The Irish language has made significant progress in Northern Ireland in recent years, not least in engaging the interest and respect of some people within the unionist tradition. The aggressive politicisation of the language, however, could make it a highly divisive issue. I hope that you and the other signatories of your letter would share the Government's desire to avoid that happening.

I trust you will inform the other signatories of the contents of this reply.

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

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