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To see the Irish language &
Bairdian bills for this.*



(Briefing) 19/6/98

(Irish Language) 7/7/98

FROM: J LOUGHREY (MRS)
PS/MR WORTHINGTON (DENI)

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See Copy Distribution below

To: 1. Tony Worthington - for approval *3/7*
2. PS/Secretary of State

Two content

IRISH LANGUAGE IN THE ASSEMBLY

Summary

Issue: Contribution on Irish language policy to defensive note for use in Assembly.

Timescale: Immediate.

Background

1. At the Ministerial meeting on 27 June, there was discussion of the line to take, should the subject of the use of Irish in the Assembly be raised. It was suggested that it would be useful to have a paper setting out what the Government had done to recognise Irish. I attach a draft paper.

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DRAFT PAPER ON IRISH LANGUAGE

The Good Friday Agreement committed all participants to respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the British Government undertook certain commitments in relation to the Irish language. On 4 June the Government announced its intention to sign the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Irish language will attract the general protection of Part II of the Charter, which closely mirrors the general provisions of the section on Irish in the Good Friday Agreement. The Government has also stated its intention to specify Irish for the more specific provisions of Part III of the Charter at an early date. It is currently identifying which of the provisions of Part III are most appropriate for Northern Ireland circumstances.

Specific provisions in the Good Friday Agreement refer to broadcasting. For several years the broadcasting authorities in the UK and the Republic of Ireland have been in negotiation on the extension of reception of Irish broadcasting in Northern Ireland. This should facilitate a more widespread reception of Teilifis na Gaeilge in Northern Ireland. Officials have also commenced exploratory meetings with relevant agencies on more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland.

Prior to the Good Friday Agreement, the Government had followed a policy, over a period of years, of encouraging greater appreciation of, and respect for the Irish language in Northern Ireland as an important strand in its cultural heritage. Increasing amounts of finance have been provided for the language, reaching over £3m per annum in recent years. Over half this amount was spent on Irish medium education. Other expenditure included funding from the Central Community Relations Unit, Arts Council for Northern Ireland and local economic regeneration programmes to support Irish language cultural projects, including financial assistance for the publication of a weekly newspaper. Applications for financial assistance are assessed on their merits, according to the criteria of the relevant programmes.

The Government has also sought to remove unnecessary obstacles to use of the language by those who desire to do so. In this context, Government legislation was amended in 1995 to permit the erection of bilingual street name-plates. A number of District Councils have subsequently erected street name-plates in English and Irish.

Use of Irish language personal names is fully compatible with the law and recognised as such by the administration. When a District Council has adopted a bilingual street name, the use of an Irish language street address is also recognised for official purposes. Correspondence in Irish is translated

by Government Departments and responded to in English. It is anticipated that specification of Irish for purposes of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter will necessitate an extension of this level of recognition by the public sector.

IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

The Good Friday Agreement also included a commitment to "place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education in line with current provision for integrated education". This has been included in an Order-in-Council currently before Parliament which also provides for day-one recurrent funding of Irish-medium schools, which meet the viability criteria, mirroring conditions for integrated schools. In addition there is provision to enable the Department to grant-aid a body (or bodies) to support the objectives of encouraging or promoting Irish-medium education. Discussions with Irish-medium interests on the role and remit of such a body will now begin.

The Irish-medium education sector has also benefited from a number of other decisions taken in the last few months. These include -

- additional resources of £3m in the Chancellor's announcement will meet the cost of the new school for Bunscoil Phobal Feiste and contribute to the costs of new provision for Meanscoil Feiste;
- a number of places in Irish-medium settings are included in the pre-school plans approved last week by the Department of Education;
- the viability criteria for Irish medium secondary schools has been reduced from 100 to 80 form 1 admissions;
- the number of Primary Irish-medium education PGCE places has been doubled for next year; and
- the new Irish-medium Resource Unit to prepare materials for Irish-medium schools is now operational.