

LIAISON SUB-COMMITTEE ON CBMs - CULTURAL ISSUES

Paper by the British Government

1. Following the Secretary of State's undertaking at the last meeting of the Sub-Committee, this paper sets out the issues raised by the complexity of cultural traditions and how Government has responded to them to date. This is the baseline for any future development of policy. It is hoped that the Talks participants will contribute positively to this process of policy development.
2. The divisions between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland are reflected in cultural, as well as political, differences. There are many different historic influences which have contributed to Northern Ireland's cultural heritage and none should be identified solely with one section of the community. Furthermore, there are significant cultural influences from the wider English-speaking world and from Europe which impact equally on both sections of the community, particularly through popular culture and the mass media. However, those cultural manifestations which are local to Northern Ireland tend to be associated with either the Nationalist or Unionist communities. They are often intimately linked to nationalist or religious identity and tend to create solidarity within each section of the community, while sometimes antagonising some members of the other section. Though only relatively small numbers may participate in a particular cultural manifestation, a wider circle of sympathisers may have respect for it and attach importance to how it is regarded by the authorities. This is why some cultural issues have a special political resonance in Northern Ireland. Cultural differences are both a symptom and a cause of communal division. Yet, potentially, cultural diversity can enrich a society.

3. The Government acknowledges that no one tradition can claim predominance or unique validity within Northern Ireland. Its policy is to encourage confidence and self-esteem among those who espouse particular cultural traditions and to show that differences do not necessarily have to lead to division. The Government encourages greater mutual understanding and respect for the traditions of others. Encouraging the concept of cultural diversity is an integral part of the Government's community relations policy, which includes the Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage programmes in schools. A total of £1.2m is earmarked in the current financial year for expenditure on cultural diversity in a community relations context. Local cultural traditions, in the broadest sense, are also supported through Government programmes for the arts, sports, tourism, environment and local community and economic development. Funding agencies consider well-founded applications for financial assistance with cultural traditions projects on their merits, in the context of their programme criteria, and without favouritism towards any particular tradition.

Irish Language

4. In the 1991 Census 142,000 people indicated that they had some knowledge of the Irish language. It is assumed that most of these people would be of Catholic community background and that they gained their knowledge from the teaching of Irish as a second language in the maintained schools sector. In addition there has been a revival of interest in the language among adults in the past decade, partly linked to stronger consciousness of Irish culture among the Nationalist population. In Northern Ireland there are no geographic areas which have seen an unbroken tradition of Irish language usage. This is an important difference between the circumstances of Irish in Northern Ireland and that of Celtic languages in

Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. This can make the demand for facilities for Irish-users in Northern Ireland more difficult to estimate.

5. The Government acknowledges the special importance of the Irish language for many people in Northern Ireland, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Nationalist community. It also recognises that the vast majority of the population of Northern Ireland are English-users and that Irish-users are not placed at a practical disadvantage by the use of English in official communications, forms etc. Correspondence in Irish to Government Departments is translated and dealt with in the normal way, the correspondent receiving a reply in English. Unnecessary obstacles to the use of the language have been removed. For instance, legislation which banned District Councils from erecting street nameplates in a language other than English was repealed in 1995. The Government's approach in recent years has placed the Irish language in the context of Northern Ireland's many-stranded cultural heritage. It aims to depoliticise the language and, in addition to giving Nationalists greater opportunities to develop this aspect of their culture, encourages Unionists to see it as non-threatening.

6. The development of the Government's approach to the Irish language in the past decade is illustrated by increasing levels of financial support for projects with an Irish language dimension. In line with general policy towards cultural traditions funding, applications for assistance to such projects are treated on their merits and have to meet the funding criteria of the appropriate programme. In the last financial year £3.2m was spent on projects with an Irish language dimension, over half of this going to Irish-medium education. Other significant funding agencies include the Central Community Relations Unit, the Department of Education, the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, the Training and Employment Agency, Making Belfast Work and other local development initiatives. The Government does not accept that expenditure

on one linguistic tradition should be used as a benchmark for others and that expenditure on the Irish language in Northern Ireland should match that on Welsh or on Gaelic in Scotland, either on a global or per capita basis.

Irish in Education

7. Irish has traditionally been taught as a second language in many maintained schools and, more recently, in integrated schools. It is calculated that over £3m of education expenditure can be attributed annually to the teaching of Irish as a second language. In the past 20 years a parent driven Irish-medium education movement has also developed. This is one manifestation of the revival of interest in the language. The Department of Education will give grant-aided status to Irish medium schools if they are initially established as independent schools, demonstrate that they can meet educational standards and achieve specific enrolment viability criteria. There are now seven grant-aided primary schools attended by over 1,000 pupils and one grant-aided secondary school attended by 231 pupils. Total recurrent grants amount to £1.8m in this financial year. A further 74 pupils attend four independent Irish-medium primary schools and 54 pupils attend one independent Irish-medium secondary school. Thus, some 90% of pupils in the Irish medium sector are in schools receiving full grant aid.
8. The Government regards numerical information on long term enrolment as an essential viability criterion for grant aid to Irish medium schools. This is not simply for financial reasons; it would be difficult to deliver the statutory curriculum effectively in very small schools. In recent years the long term enrolment criteria have been maintained at a similar level for Irish medium and integrated schools. In line with a recent revision of the threshold for integrated secondary schools, the Government has now decided to reduce

the long term enrolment viability criterion for Irish-medium secondary schools from 500 to 400.

9. In addition to financial support, the Department of Education has put in place appropriate arrangements to ensure curriculum support, initial teacher training and in-service training to meet the needs of the Irish-medium sector. This includes the provision of facilities for pupils to take examinations through the medium of Irish. GCSE examinations through the medium of Irish have been available in recent years and in this academic year special arrangements have been made for A-level pupils at Meanscoil Feirste, the Irish-medium secondary school in Belfast.
10. Under the pre-school education expansion programme, Irish medium nursery schools will be eligible for grant support. Places have been reserved for Irish medium education representatives on each of the 5 Pre-School Education Advisory Groups which have been established to plan the pre-school expansion programme.

Irish Language in the Media

11. The mass media are important for the maintenance of a minority language. There is already some Government support for Irish language media projects. The weekly newspaper LA has received an annual grant of £25,000 for several years. The Training and Employment Agency has provided training courses in television studio techniques for Irish-users. Producers of Irish language films can bid for support from the Northern Ireland Film Commission.
12. Transmission of programmes in Irish on local television and radio is a matter for the broadcasting authorities and the BBC, in particular, has shown itself

responsive to demand. Temporary broadcasting licenses have been granted to local Irish language radio stations, transmitting for a limited period. Since 1996 a full Irish language television service, Teilifis na Gaeilge, has been operational in the Republic of Ireland and many people in Northern Ireland have been able to receive it. Negotiations are ongoing between the UK agencies responsible for broadcasting and the Republic of Ireland authorities on a possible extension of the area of Northern Ireland reached by ROI television transmitters, including Teilifis na Gaeilge.

Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

13. The Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages dates from 1992 when the Council of Europe adopted it for their purpose of encouraging the preservation and, if possible, revival of indigenous minority languages throughout Europe. The UK Government is currently actively considering the implications of signing this Charter in terms of the different minority languages within the United Kingdom.

Unionist Culture

14. Major elements in Northern Ireland's cultural heritage derive from British traditions to which the Unionist community are particularly attached. Some of these are directly related to local Protestant culture, including the traditions of the Loyal Orders and parades. Others have broader connections to the history and traditions of the United Kingdom, including traditions of military service. There has been considerable interest in recent years in the participation of people from this region in the First World War and particularly the Battle of the Somme. Though this military tradition embraced both Protestants and Catholics on the island of Ireland, it has special resonance for the Northern Ireland Unionist community. In the context of its overall

policy on cultural traditions, the Government is prepared to assist financially well-founded requests for assistance to projects related to British/Unionist traditions. In this context, it has provided assistance to groups such as the Somme Association, the Ulster Society and the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council.

Ulster-Scots Traditions

15. A further important strand in Northern Ireland cultural heritage derives from long-standing links with Scotland. Financial assistance to projects associated with the Scottish heritage and the Ulster-Scots linguistic tradition will be considered on their merits. Significant funding for the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council has been made available. The Government does not accept that support for the Ulster-Scots linguistic traditions should be at identical levels as that provided for the Irish language, just as it rejects levels of expenditure in Scotland and Wales as benchmarks for the Irish language.

British Government

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