

# STATE PAPERS

## Irish language act prefigured in previously confidential files

Éamon Phoenix

THE ongoing dispute between the DUP and Sinn Féin over an Irish Language Act is prefigured in previously confidential files released today in Belfast. The papers highlight Irish government pressure on the British in 1992 for the adoption of a Welsh-style Irish language act in the north.

They also reveal how British efforts to legalise the use of Irish in courts unexpectedly encountered difficulties with the lord chancellor. The files contain a paper on the Irish language in Northern Ireland submitted by the Irish side in the Joint Secretariat at Maryfield, Co Down for consideration by British officials. Irish officials claim that the language falls under Article 5(a) of the 1985 Anglo-Irish

Agreement in regard to respect for cultural heritage and identity. "Implicit in this", the paper states, "is a recognition and acceptance that the Irish language is an important part of Irish national identity". The Irish officials recognised recent progress through the establishment of the Ulta Trust and a question on the language in the 1991 Census. However, the Dublin government believed

that some of their long-standing concerns remained unaddressed. This included, in particular, the repeal of the 1949 Stormont Public Health and Local Government Act which prohibited Irish street names. Irish officials argued that "the Irish language should be given parity of esteem with English" and legislation should be introduced "similar to the Welsh Language Act of 1987".

The files reveal a clear effort by the Northern Ireland Office to enable litigants to use Irish in courts. In a letter to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, agreement had been sought to amend the 1737 Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) which had enacted that only English could be used. In his reply, Lord Mackay agreed in principle to the

removal of this barrier while treating Irish as "a non-indigenous language". The Lord Chancellor's reply did not satisfy DJ Watkins, of the Stormont Central Secretariat, who felt that his approach was at variance with the British government's more "liberal" stance. As a result, he advised secretary of state Patrick Mayhew to write asking the Lord Chancellor to consider the issue further.

## Bishops voice opposition to priority funding for integrated education

Éamon Phoenix

CATHOLIC bishops voiced their opposition to priority funding for integrated education and their support for the Irish language at a meeting with direct rule ministers at Stormont in 1988.

The meeting between Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich and four other bishops with secretary of state Tom King and education minister Brian Mawhinney took place in July that

year to discuss government proposals for education reform.

The cardinal, right, said they shared the aim of improving standards but objected to the introduction of a new "grant maintained status" for integrated schools which, he said, threatened the position of Catholic



schools.

Bishop Patrick Walsh referred to west Belfast where "the situation was aggravated because parents had not supported the bishops' policy", whereby pupils were not attending their local parish schools but were being sent to others in the area.

As a result, two schools had become "very popular", leaving four others very weak.

However, he felt that the new Corpus Christi College was getting off to a good start thanks to the links

which existed with local parishes.

Dr Mawhinney observed that parents in west Belfast had made their views known in a way that had been difficult for the education authorities – and the Church – to ignore.

Turning to integrated education, Cardinal Ó Fiaich said the bishops had difficulty with the proposal to give grant maintained integrated schools capital funding priority over other schools which might be doing an equally good job through ecumenism and "hands across the

divide".

Dr Mawhinney reassured them "the proposal was meant as a signal, and even as such was small".

Finally, Bishop Cahal Daly wished to record the bishops' concern about the position of the Irish language in the school curriculum.

Mr King replied that there was no intention of diminishing the importance of Irish, but the cardinal said the language appeared in the government's proposals in a "downgraded position".

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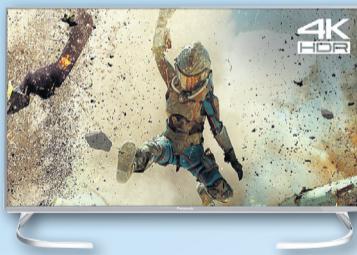
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