



IBRG

LAMBETH

IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

c/o 12 Cresset St,
Clapham SW4 6BP.

6 February 1984.

A Chara / A Chairde,

Please find enclosed a fact sheet explaining some background to a school operating in Belfast and teaching through the use of the Irish language.

As you will see they have had extreme difficulty in getting the school started and in keeping it going and they have had to contend with a large degree of opposition from the Northern Ireland authorities as well as the normal difficulties associated with running such a venture.

At the moment their financial situation is pretty desperate and they are having to find approximately £1600 per week just to keep going. Any donations therefore, however small, would be gratefully received by them (the address is shown on the fact sheet).

In addition they have applied for grant aid and there is a two month waiting period for objections or comments to be lodged. Please write, supporting the school, to:

The Dept of Education.
Rathgael House,
Balloo Road,
Bangor. Co. Down.
BT 19 2PR

Quote proposal No. 46 of the B.E.L.B.

It is important for this school and schools like it to survive and grow if we are ever to see a revival and strengthening of the Irish language and culture. Every time a language dies then a way of expression dies too and the world becomes a little bit more bland and unappealing.

Support Bunscoil Ghaelach, Bheal Feirste.

Is mise,

Gearoid MacGearailt.
Runaí / Secretary.



IBRG

LAMBETH

IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

BUNSCOIL CHAEILGE - BHEAL FEIRSTE.

FACT SHEET 3.

There are well over half a million fluent Irish speakers in Ireland today but unfortunately the vast majority of these hardly ever use the language. Outside of the Gaeltacht, which is itself shrinking, it is difficult for an Irish speaker to use the language to any great extent and isolated Irish speaking families face great, and sometimes overwhelming, pressures from the English speaking environment. Language is a community phenomenon and Irish is going the way of a language without a community. Thus the setting up of Irish speaking communities in English speaking parts of Ireland is essential to the spread and survival of the language.

In such a community, using Irish as the family language does not demand the same will and commitment as that facing isolated families. The children will have Irish speaking playmates and the community can act as a focus to increase the use of Irish in its immediate area. The alternative is to watch the language slowly die.

In 1960 a number of young couples came together in Belfast to found such a community. They had all learned Irish as a second language in Cumann Chluain Ard and possessed little else but determination - no money or land or building experience. And it took nine years before the first five families moved into the houses they had built themselves. There are now eleven families, fifty eight people, living in Pobal Feirste.

In 1971 enough children in the community had reached school age for an Irish-medium school to be considered (as education through the medium of Irish is an obvious extension to raising an Irish speaking family). A second hand prefabricated building was bought and raised within a week and the school began immediately with nine children, two of which came from Irish speaking families outside of the community. The school is managed and run by the parents with no head teacher.

Pobal Feirste has always been aware of the dangers of the ghetto mentality and part of its purpose is to spread Irish as well as to preserve it. In 1978 it founded a bilingual nursery to teach Irish to children from English speaking backgrounds and so enable them to attend the primary school. Research has shown that children learn a second language quickest at pre-school level.

The primary school began with 9 children and the nursery with 7. There are now 140 children attending the school and an indication of the growth pattern is that while 3 of the pupils were born in 1972, it has 41 children with birthdays in 1978. Applications from 50 children were received for 1983-84 and this demand, for financial reasons, is becoming more than the school can cater for given that it is entirely self-supporting.

In 1967 the Department of Education told an enquirer that anyone connected with an Irish-medium school would be prosecuted and its attitude to the school since its formation has been one of thinly disguised hostility. Although no-one was eventually prosecuted it took seven years of negotiations before the Department inspected the school and found the standard of education to be satisfactory. This legalised the school and recognised for the first time the principle of Irish-medium education in 'Northern Ireland'. However its application for grant aid was refused for a number of spurious reasons and the parents are now fighting this issue strongly. Until they win however they must support the school by their own efforts.

Unfortunately its very success could be its eventual undoing. Five years ago it involved a dozen families, had two classrooms and two teachers. Now there are 115 families, 9 classrooms, 7 teachers, 4 assistants, a mini-bus and a driver. Administration and fund-raising have become increasingly complex as the numbers increase and every year capital must be raised to buy and equip new buildings.

The school is situated in West Belfast, one of the most deprived areas in Western Europe. As many of the parents are not well off, the school fees have been kept to an almost nominal level. Finances have always been precarious and now more so than ever.

The Irish language will survive or die in this generation and this school has a key role to play in its survival and revival in Belfast. Any support you can offer the school will have a more far-reaching effect than you could ever realise.

Send subscriptions, donations to: An Cisteoir, Scoil Chaelach Bheal Feirste,
58A Shaw's Road, Belfast, Ireland.

Write to your local M.P. and demand grant aid support for the school.

Write to your Member of the European Parliament and ask him/her to raise the question of state funding within that body.

Write to BUNSCOIL and tell them what you have done.

Call upon your Trade Union or similar organisation to do all or part of the above.

GO RAIBH MAITH AGAT !