



Northern Ireland power-sharing govt. suffers first setback with fight over Gaelic language

By SHAWN POGATCHNIK
Associated Press Writer

The Associated Press

Updated: 8:22 a.m. ET Oct. 16, 2007

DUBLIN, Ireland - Relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland's power-sharing government suffered their first blow Tuesday as Protestants vetoed plans to introduce a law promoting Gaelic.

The little-spoken language is promoted by Catholics as a way to emphasize their Irish identity on this overwhelmingly English-speaking island. The tongue enjoys constitutional protection in the Republic of Ireland and British state funding in Scotland.

But Northern Ireland's Protestant minister for culture, Edwin Poots, told the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast that an Irish Language Act _ an idea proposed by the British and Irish governments in the 2006 peace proposals that drove this year's revival of power-sharing _ would be too expensive and divisive.

Catholic leaders accused the Protestant side of reneging on the 2006 proposals. They threatened to go over the Protestants' heads and seek intervention from Britain, which retains ultimate power in Northern Ireland.

Poots mocked the idea that the Catholic side, long committed to forcing Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom, would seek British help.

"I have no responsibilities for the decisions taken by the two governments, the Republic of Ireland government and the U.K. government. This house is its own master," Poots said to roars of approval from his Protestant side of the assembly.

"For years they were shouting `Brits out!'" he said of Catholic lawmakers opposite. "But now they're shouting `Brits in!' for the purposes of this decision."

Surprisingly, the fate of Gaelic has been the only public source of sectarian friction in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which in May elected a new 12-member administration run jointly by British Protestants and Irish Catholics. On every other front, the 5-month-old coalition has united on policies.

Last week the major Catholic-backed party Sinn Fein _ whose Gaelic name is pronounced "Shin Fane" and means "Ourselves" _ blocked a Protestant lawmaker's motion calling for use of Gaelic to be banned from assembly debates.

During Tuesday's debate, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and several other Catholic lawmakers began their speeches addressing the Protestant speaker, William Hay, with the words, "Go raibh maith agat, ceann comhairle" _ Gaelic for "Thank you, speaker."

Some kept speaking Gaelic until Hay _ who like all Protestants and many Catholics in the 108-member assembly cannot understand Gaelic _ called on them to ask their question. All then switched to English.

Poots said they were trying "to ram it (Gaelic) down people's throats."

Adams accused Poots' Democratic Unionist Party of reneging on a commitment to back an Irish Language Act. He said government services in Gaelic should cost exactly the same as those already delivered in English _ and suggested that Protestant opposition would be overcome somehow.

"Does he accept that in one way or another, there will be an Irish Language Act?" Adams said to howls of derision from the Protestant side.

Only Catholic schools teach Gaelic in Northern Ireland. About 4,000 students go to primarily Gaelic-speaking schools, which Poots said received 11.3 million pounds (US\$23 million, euro16 million) in

taxpayer funds last year.

The envisioned Irish Language Act would require government agencies and courts to deliver services in Gaelic.

Poots said such a program would snowball unpredictably in cost, spreading from Northern Ireland's 11 government departments with 23,000 civil servants to its local councils and other state-run bodies, which employ five times as many people. Courts would need to employ officials for simultaneous translation.

He noted that no Catholic lawmaker was prepared to specify what current spending, on hospitals, schools or roads, should be cut to fund the project.

Northern Ireland tax rates, principally collected from property owners, have soared since the initial formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. The number of government departments was doubled to accommodate the ministerial office demands of local parties, four of which form the power-sharing administration.

On the Net

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk>

Copyright 2007 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21320227/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)
© 2007 MSNBC.com