

Twenty-second Session  
New York, 20-29 April 2004

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Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda

REPORTS OF THE DIVISIONS

Report of Ireland\*

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Since the Twenty-First Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names held in Berlin in August-September 2002 the legal status of Ireland's geographical names has been changed by the enactment of the Official Languages Act 2003. (The primary objective of this Act is to ensure better availability and a higher standard of public services through the Irish language).

### Historical background

In Ireland by far the greater part of the administrative and other important placenames derive from the Irish language. Irish is the oldest recorded language in Ireland and it is generally agreed that the language has been spoken in the country for at least the last 2,300 years. Irish has an established tradition of writing going back to the fifth century and placenames are attested in Irish language sources from the early sixth century many of which are still in use.

Due to historical circumstances, by the beginning of the 17th century all Ireland, for the first time, was under the political administration of England. The Irish language, although the general language of the country, had no official status and therefore the placenames of Ireland in English government records appeared invariably in forms accommodated, more or less, to conventions of English spelling. In the nineteenth century, the English spellings of the placenames were standardised by the Ordnance Survey for their large scale maps and these were adopted subsequently for official use.

In 1922, the independent Irish State accorded official status to the Irish language in addition to the English language and under the Constitution of Ireland adopted in 1937 Irish was accorded the status of first official language. Consequently, Irish forms of placenames were required for official use. Irish placename forms were introduced, often in ad hoc manner, and were used in official business, in signing and in schools. Despite their widespread use, however, Irish forms of placenames, with few exceptions, did not have any legal status.

In 1946 An Coimisiún Logainmneacha, the Placenames Commission, was appointed under the Seal of the Minister for Finance with terms of reference to study the placenames of Ireland, to determine *the correct original forms of the names and to publish lists of the Irish forms of the names for official use*. In 1956 the Placenames Branch was established in the Ordnance Survey in order to undertake the necessary research to establish the Irish language forms. Despite the activity of the Placenames Commission and the Placenames Branch the legal status of Ireland's placenames remained largely unaltered.

### Legal status of Ireland's placenames before the Official Languages Act 2003

Placenames contained in the maps of Ordnance Survey Ireland which date back to the time of the original mapping and valuation of the country between 1824 and 1874 were deemed to be the definitive legal placenames of the country. The maps and the placenames were exclusively in the English language.

The Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act 1973 provided for definitive Irish language versions of placenames to be made available for official use. The Act allowed the Minister to declare by Order, having received and considered the advice of an Placenames Commission, the equivalent in the Irish language of a placename specified in the Order to be such word or words as might be specified

in the Order. The Irish words then would have the same meaning and same force and effect as the placename. Two Orders were made under this Act: one in 1975 to declare Irish language versions of the names of postal towns and one in 2001 to change a name specified in the the 1975 Order.

While the 1973 Act allowed definitive Irish language versions of placenames to be made available for official use, it also meant in legal terms that the placename remained in the English language only. The approach taken is akin to providing that a piece of computer code can be used for legal purposes as the equivalent of a placename (e.g. in the register of electors, Global Positioning Systems): the computer code has the same force and effect, but never becomes the placename. This situation was regarded as unacceptable in the context of the Official Languages Act. Accordingly, the Placenames (Irish forms) Act 1973 was appealed and its provisions, with fundamental amendments, were incorporated in the Official Languages Act 2003.

#### Legal position under the Official Languages Act 2003

Under Part 5 of the Official Languages Act, which came into effect on 30 October 2003, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs may by Order declare the Irish language version of a placename specified in the Order. Once such a statutory order is made in respect of any particular placename in any area outside the Gaeltacht, (the legally defined traditionally Irish speaking area), the effect of the new legislation is that the Irish and the English versions of the placename have the same status and the same legal force and effect.

Where the Minister makes an Order in respect of a placename in the Gaeltacht, the English version of that placename ceases to have any legal force and effect. While this is without prejudice to any private use and most public use of the English version, the Act provides that the English version may not be used in future in Acts of the Oireachtas (Parliament) or in Statutory Instruments, or road and street signs or on Ordnance Survey Maps. (The Ordnance Survey Ireland Act 2001 was ammended to take account of these changes).

The Minister has made seven Placename Orders under part 5 of the Act on the advice of the Placenames Commission. The Orders reflect research that has been completed and published by the Commission down through the years since its establishment in 1946. These Placename Orders declare the official Irish version of placenames for County Kilkenny, County Louth, County Limerick, County Monaghan, County Waterford (except the Gaeltacht), and County Offaly and the official names of administrative Counties and Provinces.

An Order to declare the official Irish placenames for the Gaeltacht areas will be made in May 2004 and further Orders for County Tipperary, County Dublin and County Galway will be made before the end of the year.

It is the objective of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to have the remaining research and the necessary orders in respect of the remaining counties completed within 10 years.