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“An abject failure” is how An Coimisinéir Teanga (Irish Language Commissioner), Seán Ó Cuirreáin, described the ending nearly 40 years ago of the requirement for civil servants to have competence in Irish as well as English, when addressing a conference in Dublin today (03.02.2011).

Former Finance Minister, Richie Ryan TD, made knowledge of Irish optional for civil servants in 1974 when he told Dáil Éireann that his Government was *“satisfied that by replacing the compulsion which did so much damage to the Irish language over the past half century with enthusiasm for the language, we will have people more readily disposed to use Irish.”*

An Coimisinéir Teanga said that while Ryan’s assertion may have been well-intentioned, history had unfortunately shown it to be fundamentally flawed. The language had subsequently become marginal to the point of insignificance in the workings of many Government departments and agencies.

He cited the Department of Education and Skills, which recently revealed that only 1.5% of its administrative staff had sufficient competence in Irish to be able to provide service in that language. “That department is by no means unique and the absence of competence in Irish is common through most Government departments and agencies,” he said.

While not advocating a return to “compulsory Irish”, Mr. Ó Cuirreáin said some form of “half-way house” approach needed to be found if compulsory English was not to become the norm for the public in the conduct of all business with the State.

“The State invests heavily in the teaching of Irish and requires schoolchildren to study its official languages – a standard practice in other countries. Yet, it fails to adequately facilitate the subsequent use of Irish by those who have acquired it. Joined-up thinking is missing in the current approach” he said.

Mr. Ó Cuirreáin said he hoped the new 20-Year Strategy for Irish launched by the Government with cross-party support would introduce fundamental reforms.

He suggested that a modern, holistic, and structured approach was required to transform the teaching of Irish to such an extent that all students would acquire basic fluency through the education system. It would follow that those who had achieved such fluency should be facilitated in using the language with ease afterwards in their dealings with state organisations.

“This is a realistic and inspiring vision, and, in fact, the only way of getting value for money for the significant investment made in the teaching and promotion of Irish to ensure its long-term survival in the life of our nation” he said.

(ENDS)

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