

Hello from Belfast – from Orla Adams

Dissident Unionists describe Irish as a "leprechaun language"

November 2009

The Traditional Unionist Voice party has apologised for its "childishness" after issuing a statement under the name of TUV vice-chairman Keith Harbinson. He condemned the Department of Education for "wasting" money on the Irish language.

The original press release was entitled "TUV Blast Leprechaun Language Waste" and distributed to media outlets.

However, that was changed to "TUV Blast Irish Language Waste" when the press release was posted on the party's website. It was distributed to the wider media, but on the party's website the statement was changed to remove the offensive term.

A spokesman for the party told reporters the original words were a "childish mistake".

It has been maintained that Mr Harbinson, who stood as a candidate for the party in last year's by-election in Dromore, was unhappy that the term "leprechaun language" was used. It has been claimed it had been added to the press release by an employee of the party.

After the furore, Mr Harbinson said he wished to apologise for any offence which was "unintended". "We have apologised if we have hurt feelings," he said. "Really the focus on the description of the Irish language is getting away from the substantive issue which is why the minister is spending £47,000 on Irish translation."

The figure was exposed after questions from the assembly during the week. The Alliance Party Education representative's, Trevor Lunn, assembly question found that between 2007/08 and 2008/09 the figure spent on Irish translation in the Education Department rose from £13,274 to £47,062.

The TUV have claimed that this is waste of much needed financial resources that should be redirected to the Transfer Test debacle (11 plus entry exam for secondary schools in the North).

The term "leprechaun language" was famously used by the current Finance Minister Sammy Wilson during a debate at Belfast City Council in the 1980s when members of Sinn Fein spoke in both Irish and English during council proceedings.

He used the term 'Leprechaun Language' when referring to Irish during a debate in Belfast City Hall. This was around the same time that he referred to Catholics as 'gypsies', and Alex Maskey, after he had been shot in the stomach, as 'Lead-belly'.

It is important to note that Irish language schools top all the academic tables in the North ahead of mainstream comprehensives and Catholic maintained schools. So perhaps Unionism should be taking a leaf out of Irish language schools and educating their members to the highest regard before letting them loose on the public.

The original statement has been removed from the website and is no longer available for the public.

The amended statement is at the end of this article taken from the TUV Website.

<http://www.tuv.org.uk/press-releases/view/377/tuv-blast-irish-language-waste>

TUV Blast Irish Language Waste

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Statement by TUV vice-chairman Keith Harbinson:

“The revelation that spending on Irish translation increased by more than 350% in the Department of Education over the last year will shock many – and not just Unionists.

“While the Minister is happy to squander money on a dead language in order to promote her own narrow political agenda, thousands of parents and pupils are left in a state of anxiety as the transfer system has descended to state of unregulated chaos. This is nothing short of outrageous, and I would respectfully suggest that the Minister employ more time, effort and budget towards finding a resolution to the current calamity, which she has brought to bear on our prized Education System.

“It seems that Minister Ruane is more concerned about using her Ministerial position to further her own narrow Republican agenda by wasting departmental money on Irish than the future of Ulster’s children”.