

LD



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

Mr Thomas
Mr Stephens
Mr Bell
Mr Watkins

2 Mrs Sean
3 PA 'Famine'

Mrs V. i.
pa

30 May 1997

Mr Maccabe
Mr Hill

Jeff
did forget to correct each the text 3/6

Dear John,

A. Shunleir 3/6

Great Irish Famine Event: Message from Prime Minister

Your letter of 28 May asked for a draft message from the Prime Minister for use at the Great Irish Famine Event on Saturday 31 May (full details in my letter to you of 22 May). We consider that a Prime Ministerial message (rather than a video message from the Foreign Secretary or Northern Ireland Secretary, for example) is the best option to make the required impact and to avoid any impression of a snub. A number of other heads of Government have contributed, either on video or in written form.

The exact use of the Prime Minister's message (draft attached) will be clarified by the organisers today. It will probably appear on a large screen at the event or may be read out by the British Ambassador, Mrs Veronica Sutherland, who is attending the commemoration.

I enclose a sample text sent by the organisers of the kind of message they hope world leaders will send. The text of President Clinton's video message is also enclosed. The draft prepared for the Prime Minister is a little fuller than either, but the Irish would probably expect this, given our role 150 years ago.

The text explicitly acknowledges British failings of the time while making clear that the famine began as a natural disaster. The Irish should welcome this tone - the organisers have been keen that the event approaches the famine in a spirit of reconciliation rather than recrimination, but any attempt by us to skate over the very considerable failings of official policies of the time would be quickly seized upon by Irish commentators. The text includes positive references to the Irish diaspora and to Irish work in the humanitarian field which should be welcomed by an Irish audience.

Jan. 1997 14:47

FR:PL NIO LONDON

TO

No. 062547 P. 3/83

0171 270 3331



As you will appreciate, timing is short. I would be most grateful if you would fax the approved text direct to the Embassy in Dublin, as well as sending it back here.

Yours ever,

Fiona

(Fiona Mylchreest)
Private Secretary

John Holmes Esq
10 Downing Street

0171 270 3331

**DRAFT MESSAGE FROM PRIME MINISTER ON OCCASION OF THE GREAT
IRISH FAMINE EVENT: 31 MAY- 1 JUNE 1997**

I am glad to have this opportunity to join with you in commemorating all those who suffered and died during the Great Irish Famine.

The Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. We must not forget such an immense human tragedy and must draw lessons from it.

While remembering with humility the devastation of the Famine, it is also right that we should pay tribute to the ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of such a catastrophe. By 1861 there were over 800,000 Irish-born people in England, Scotland and Wales as a result of mass emigration from Ireland. Now, more people of Irish descent live in Britain than live in the Irish Republic. Britain has benefitted immeasurably from the skills and talents of Irish people, not only in areas such as music, the arts and the caring professions, but across the whole spectrum of our political, economic and social life.

Let us therefore today celebrate the resilience and courage of those Irish men and women who were able to forge another life outside Ireland, and give thanks for the rich culture and vitality they brought with them. Britain, the US and many Commonwealth countries, home to the majority of the Irish diaspora, are richer for their presence and the contribution they have made.

One hundred and fifty years ago, those who governed in London failed the people of these islands by adhering too strictly to economic dogma. What then began as a crop failure culminated in human tragedy. There are countries today facing natural disasters which threaten to overwhelm them. Particularly in the light of our own history and experience, we, the British and Irish peoples, must help tackle these problems with imagination, flexibility and compassion.

I know that the Irish people, catalysed by their own famine history, have long been particularly active in fighting poverty and hunger throughout the world. My government too has given a strong pledge to combat world poverty. I hope that this event, which commemorates a tragedy in our shared history, will give inspiration to all our peoples who strive for these shared goals.