

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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10 August 1998

Mr. John Biggar
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear John,

I attended a lunch today hosted by the British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Roger Wheeler, in honour of the Chief of Staff, Lt. General Gerry McMahon, who is on a two day visit to London and Edinburgh. The lunch followed military consultations at the Ministry of Defence and an official welcome ceremony this morning for the Chief of Staff by the Scots Guards, on Horse Guards Parade. The ceremony is likely to be reported in tomorrow's Irish papers, with photographs, as the first official visit in uniform by an Irish Chief of Staff. The Chief of Staff is travelling this afternoon to Edinburgh to attend the military tattoo as the guest of General Wheeler.

At the lunch I was seated beside General Sir Roger Wheeler, who reminisced at length about his Irish connections and his time as G.O.C. in Northern Ireland. He spoke of his hopes for the peace process and of the beneficial effect of common membership of the E.U. on long term relations between the two islands. He said he was extremely pleased that recent political developments had made it possible to build on contacts over the years to the extent that today's visit and ceremonies could be seen as an uncontroversial, normal expression of relations between the two countries.

The only other non-military person at the lunch was George Fergusson, Head of the Republic of Ireland Department of the FCO. He raised with me the question of attendance at the 80th Anniviersary Armistice Day celebrations,

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on 11 November 1998. He said that, as it was now expected that President McAleese would attend the inauguration of the Island of Ireland First World War Memorial at Messines and Queen Elizabeth would be attending ceremonies in Ypres on the same day, consideration was being given to the handling of what could potentially be a very symbolic event in relations between Ireland and Britain. He said that, in principle, the Foreign Office, Downing Street and Buckingham Palace were agreed that, if possible, efforts should be made to have a joint ceremony involving the President and the Queen at Messines. The logistics could be difficult, as the Queen was committed to attending a lunch in Paris on the day, hosted by President Chirac, and the Messines ceremony would have to take place in daylight. However, they hoped that it would be possible to agree a 15-30 minute section of the Messines ceremony which would involve both Heads of State. There might also be some question of a British suggestion that the President would participate in a separate ceremony at Ypres which the Queen is already committed to (as some form of "balance"?).

Fergusson said that he felt it would be useful if the British Embassy in Dublin were to begin discusisons on the possiblilities in the coming weeks. If the Embassy has not yet been in contact with the Department, or the Department of the Taoiseach, it is likely that they will be shortly.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Gaffey

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