

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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14 August 1998

Mr Michael Gaffey
Charge d'Affaires
Embassy
London

Dear Michael,

Please refer to your report of 10 August 1998 to John Biggar on the lunch hosted by the British Chief of Staff.

As regards your conversation with George Fergusson of the RID/FCO on the question of the President attending the inauguration of a memorial at Messines on 11 November 1998, I am attaching copies of various papers which give the background to the President's possible involvement with this event.

At present, the position is that the President has not been formally invited and has not taken a definite decision regarding attendance. Informally, the President has indicated that she is disposed to attend, provided Queen Elizabeth attends also. The Taoiseach is in general agreement with this position. I understand from our Embassy in Brussels that the attendance of the King of the Belgians also remains to be confirmed (Maurice Biggar and his British opposite number will be meeting the King's Head of Ceremony on 1 September, following which this point should be clarified).

The nature of the actual ceremony on 11 November - and who should organise it - remains to be clarified and it might be useful if the British and ourselves could agree a joint approach in advance of the meeting with Belgian protocol next month. I have discussed the matter with the Chief of Protocol who feels that the Embassy in London should be asked to make an approach to the British authorities (presumably Mr Fergusson of the RID) along the following lines:

* It would be desirable for both Governments to agree on the general format

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of the ceremony on 11 November and then to approach the Belgian authorities to see if they would coordinate the protocol aspects (including the question of who might issue the invitations to the participants in the ceremony) given the likely involvement of their own Head of State. As you can see from Ambassador Ryan's report of 3 August, the Messines municipality seems willing to issue the invitations but we wonder if they would have the capacity to follow through with the other arrangements.

* If the King of the Belgians does agree to attend, the protocol services of the three countries could cooperate in bringing forward the arrangements. This might involve representatives of FCO and D/FA protocol travelling to Flanders to "walk the ground" in the first instance.

* Our preference is for a tightly-organised ceremony, involving the three Heads of State, lasting 30 to 45 minutes, with Irish and British military bands participating but otherwise with military aspects kept to a minimum. For your background information, I might add that Paddy Harte has ambitions to widen the participation to include Heads of Government and, indeed, the heads of all political parties in Britain, NI and Ireland. We do not favour this approach.

* Neither do we favour the British suggestion that the President should participate in a separate ceremony at Ypres, as some form of "balance". As far as we are concerned, the requisite balance is contained in the ceremony at Messines, which commemorates Irish soldiers who died in the service of the then United Kingdom. The balance we would envisage is the President hosting a reception for the Irish community in Belgium at the Irish College in Louvain afterwards.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Murray
Counsellor

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