

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code:	2021/52/459
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Roinn an Taoisigh
Department of the Taoiseach

16 October 1998

Mr Paddy Harte
Joint Executive Chairman
A Journey of Reconciliation Trust
[Third Floor
An Post Building
Andrews Street
Dublin 2]

Dear Paddy

In response to a number of recent communications by you to myself and colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs, I am writing to set out our position about a number of aspects of the arrangements for the inauguration of the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messines on 11 November next.

1. As regards your letter of 12 October about the form of the name of the location to be used on the English and Irish language versions of the plaque, Paul Murray, sensitive to the points you made, went back, via our Brussels Embassy, to the official Belgian authorities to see would they be prepared to modify the position they had previously indicated to us, by reference to their concern for linguistic sensitivities in the Flanders region and Flemish community of Belgium. Happily, the Belgian authorities while adhering to the view that, in strict protocol terms, it was not correct, were ready to agree, as an exceptional step, having regard to the points you made in your letter, that the English and Irish language versions of the plaque could use the form, Messines. I understand that Mr Gerry Staunton of the Department of Foreign Affairs sent you yesterday the proposed final texts of the inscriptions in the four languages.

2. As regards the text of the Peace Pledge, on which you have had some exchanges with Paul Murray, this is ultimately a matter for the Trust. We in the Departments concerned would support the amendments previously proposed to you by Paul Murray, for the good reasons that he put to you. Our understanding is that you were to seek the agreement of your Joint Chairman, Mr Glen Barr, for these amendments.

Tithe an Rialtais, Baile Átha Cliath 2.
Government Buildings, Dublin 2.

©DFA/2021/52/459

As I mentioned to you on the phone earlier this week, Paul and I feel that the direct references to Protestants and Catholics were not quite in line with the reality that any differences back home in Ireland between those from both major traditions in the island of Ireland who fought side by side at Messines were more political than religious. As indicated, the wording is ultimately a matter for the Trust but, with Paul Murray's agreement, I would suggest that instead of the second paragraph beginning "As Protestants and Catholics", it might instead begin as follows:

As representatives of both major traditions in the island of Ireland, we apologise ..... and that in the last sentence of that paragraph instead of referring to "Protestant and Catholic soldiers" one might instead say "soldiers of both traditions"

As regards the draft programme enclosed with your letter of 8 October, I would make the following points.

(a) any arrangement for the Irish and British military bands to lead a march from the Market Place to the Peace Park will need to be confirmed with the respective military authorities. I had not previously been aware of this element and had understood that the bands would proceed directly to the Peace Park.

(b) it will be essential to ensure that the involvement of the choir does not prevent the interdenominational service ending at the agreed time, the Irish military authorities suggest a rehearsal.

(c) the inclusion of spouses in the party to greet the Heads of State on their arrival at the Peace Park was not part of what our protocol people agreed with the Belgian and British royal protocol. The addition of the spouses risks causing some slight delay in what is an extremely tight programme. We would strongly suggest that this addition be reconsidered

(d) the suggestion that the choir would sing a hymn during the laying of wreaths by the Heads of State runs counter to normal protocol in regard to such occasions, which has wreaths laid in silence. We would have to insist on this. It is our strong view, in any case, that it is more consistent with the solemnity and dignity of the occasion. It was also the position of the British and Belgian protocol when the proceedings were discussed and agreed with them.

(e) the proposal that you and Glen Barr will "lead everyone in reading the Peace Pledge" is a change from what we previously understood which was that both of you would read it on your own. The new proposal begs questions about whether all present would have a text of the pledge and how far Flemish speaking guests will be able to join in. If the proposal is to stand it would be necessary to run it past the British and Belgium authorities.

(f) more generally, if the Trust is printing a programme for the event, it should probably cover only up to the point where the three Heads of State take leave of each other at the exit from the park in order to follow their own separate

©DFA/2021/52/459

programmes, thereafter which, in the case of President McAleese, commences, of course with her attendance at the reception hosted by Messines, (Mesen) municipality.

(g) as to the time of departure from Messines, the President's officials at Aras an Uachtaráin have again confirmed that the programme will have to provide for the President being scheduled to leave Messines at 17.30.

4 As regards your letter of 12 October about laying of wreaths, we remain strongly reserved about the idea that the Mayors of Dublin, Belfast and Cork would, as part of the official ceremony, lay wreaths which, again, would be a departure from the programme agreed with the Belgian and British authorities. This proposal risks diluting the focus of the wreath-laying by the Heads of State and exceeding the time available, given the very short time that King Albert and Queen Elizabeth have to devote to the ceremony. As regards the idea that others wishing to lay wreaths would be free to do so, this is a return to an idea that we understood had been set aside. As previously indicated, it runs counter to military ceremonial that wreaths are not laid after Reveille has been sounded. It would put renewed pressure on the Army bands to accompany subsequent wreath laying and would be likely to delay the start of the Messines reception. As it is, we will to have persuade the Belgian and British authorities to include the wreath-laying by the Burgemeester and the Joint Chairmen which was not part of what was agreed with them. We should be able to secure their agreement to this but in order to do so, we need to avoid approaching them with a whole string of departures from what we agreed with them. Ultimately, however, what happens after the end of the official ceremony involving the Heads of State is a matter for the Trust, so long as it does not delay the start of the reception.

5 Finally as to the proposed invitation lists you have sent us, I am, as mentioned to you on the telephone, very concerned that the numbers who seem likely to wish to attend or whom different sources have suggested should be invited, will greatly exceed the maximum seating capacity available. My understanding is that the Messines authorities will provide seating in stands for 820 persons. However, when one leaves out 240 that they wish to include, spread over the proposed three stands, and 120 places reserved for young people actually involved in building the Tower and Park, there would remain only 460 seats. On our reckoning here, from various lists that have been sent to us, the potential attendance of such other people is up to 1065, as set out in a statement I am enclosing with this letter. At earlier stages of discussion of the ceremony, we and you had envisaged that those who hoped to attend as 'tourists' would have to stand.

However, a phone call I received from one travel agent handling bookings pointed out that some of those proposing to attend are quite elderly and would be unable to stand for the period involved. You have mentioned the possibility of a fourth stand being provided but I would point out here that the Irish military authorities, have requested (see letter enclosed) that a covered stand be provided that could used by the military bands in case of inclement weather.

©DFA/2021/52/459

It appears to us that if there were to be a high take-up of invitations there would be a strong risk that the numbers attending would exceed by a very wide margin the number of seats available. Against that background, it seems to us that you will either have to cut back substantially on your suggested invitation list or alternatively decide that many or most or even all the tourists - except for those who are very frail - will have to stand.

While we, on the official side, will have our requirements as to invitees to be definitely accommodated in the stands, the question of reconciling the space available with the potential numbers to attend is a matter for the Trust in the first place. But I again emphasise the seriousness of the potential excess demand for places: if this is not sorted out at this stage, there would be great difficulty at the Peace Park on 11 November. We are certainly prepared to help to prioritise, as suggested in your letter of today to Gerry Staunton.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Walter P Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary.

©DFA/2021/52/459