

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Secretary Gallagher, Mr Mooney Peer Thanks. We might discuss 25/11

ATTENDANCE BY THE PRESIDENT
AT WORLD WAR ONE COMMEMORATIONS

1. As discussed, Kevin Myers devoted his column in the *Irish Times* of 18 November 1998 to the President's involvement in last week's ceremony at Mesen (Messines), Flanders. On 11 November, the President inaugurated an Island of Ireland Peace Park there to commemorate all those from the island of Ireland who had fought and died in the First World War.

2. Mr Myers makes a number of allegations regarding the involvement of this Department in the organisation of this event, specifically that "Foreign Affairs had declined the invitation to the President to lay a wreath during the Menin memorial service." Myers also states:

> "We are told that President McAleese was not allowed to lay a wreath at Menin Gate because there was to be an imperial ceremony there".

3. In the circumstances, it may be useful to set out the decision-making process on this issue as not alone is it important to set the record straight but we might also need to anticipate future invitations and formulate broad policy guidelines in respect of these. This submission will confine itself to the Mesen issue but I would suggest that guidelines in respect of future invitation might be formulated and agreed with D/Taoiseach, the Aras and the Army/D/Defence.

4. I first became involved in this issue when the Ambassador, Brussels, wrote to you on 20 July 1998 regarding the inauguration the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Mesen. The issue of the President attending the British/Commonwealth commemoration at the Menin Gate at Ieper (Ypres) was not raised at that time.

5. Kathleen White, then Deputy Chief of Protocol, wrote on 29 July 1998 that the President had decided against participating in the Mesen inauguration but Ms White was later told that the Aras was prepared to reconsider if Queen Elizabeth and the King of the Belgians were involved. Ms White noted that the Taoiseach favoured participation by the President but not by Prime Minister Blair and himself (as desired by Paddy Harte, Joint Executive Chairman of the Journey of Reconciliation Trust, the

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organisation which built the Peace Park). The Taoiseach was to convey this directly to the Prime Minister. Wally Kirwan undertook to convey the Taoiseach's positive view to the Aras.

6. I reported to the Ambassador Brussels on 30 July that the President had been consulted and was now positive about attending on 11 November, provided that Queen Elizabeth and the King of the Belgians participated also.

7. On 5 August 1998 I participated in a meeting at Government Buildings with Wally Kirwan and Paddy Harte. There was consensus that there would be no anthems and no flags at the Mesen ceremony. Military aspects were to be kept to a minimum. This consensus was important as it represented a common view between ourselves and the organisers that the focus of the Mesen occasion was to be on reconciliation and that, correspondingly, militaristic displays were to be eschewed as much as possible.

8. On 10 August, the Embassy London reported a suggestion made on a social occasion by the Head of the RID, FCO, that the President might attend the ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ieper as a form of "balance". Follow-up approaches were subsequently made by the British Ambassador to the Aras and D/Taoiseach (not to ourselves) on this issue.

9. I discussed this with the then Chief of Protocol, Antoin Mac Unfraidh, in August who did not favour acceptance. Mr Mac Unfraidh felt that the requisite British-Irish balance was contained in the Mesen ceremony and that the balance we would envisage was that between a British-Irish ceremony at Mesen and a reception for the Irish community in Belgium in Louvain afterwards. This was reflected in my letter of 14 August 1998 to the Embassy in London. Mr Mac Unfraidh had, incidentally, undertaken extensive historical research into the involvement of the Irish regiments in the First World War which revealed that the record of the relationships between the regiments representing both traditions of this island was a good deal more complex than the Journey of Reconciliation Trust allowed. He also pointed to complexities surrounding the motivation of Irish nationalist volunteers. This strengthened my own conviction that the whole issue of the President's involvement needed to be handled with considerable care.

10. I felt that more information was necessary before deciding on the Ieper invitation and, as is shown by my E-mail of 16 September 1998, requested

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a report and observations from the Embassy Brussels. Mr Biggar submitted this report on 17 September.

11 The Ieper invitation was fully and sympathetically considered on the basis of this report, which was copied to D/Taoiseach. It drew attention to the fact that the Menin Gate is dedicated to the memory of the soldiers from the "Armies of the British Empire" and that the Queen on this occasion represented the Commonwealth as well as the UK.

12. The core discussions on this and other aspects of the Mesen visit involved primarily officials of the Aras (Brian McCarthy and Colm Butler), D/Taoiseach (Wally Kirwan), Protocol (Mr Mac Unfraidh initially; later Ms O'Flaherty), the Army (Comdt Brian Reade) and Anglo-Irish (myself). Discussions were extensive and open-minded with consensus forming around the major issues. Contrary to the media briefing which now seems to be taking place, there was never any question of a Foreign Affairs *diktat*. Indeed, the primary responsibility for advising the President lies with D/Taoiseach. I certainly participated fully in the discussions and outlined the relevant factors as I saw them but we did not, in fact, make a formal recommendation on the issue now giving rise to controversy.

13. While this Division did not therefore make a formal recommendation on the invitation, it was extensively discussed a number of times between Wally Kirwan and myself especially (Mr Kirwan also had separate discussions with the Aras). I also discussed it with Assistant Secretary Mac Unfraidh and officials of the Aras. I felt that the following considerations might be relevant:

(1) The role of the President. There did not seem to be any scope for the President to play a role in keeping with her status as a Head of State of a sovereign country. The form of the ceremony was already set and, had the President attended, her role would essentially have been that of a spectator. Neither was there provision in the ceremonial for an Irish dimension.

(2) The British had suggested that the President might attend to "balance" the Queen's attendance at the "Irish" event at Mesen. Mr Mac Unfraidh's view, with which I concurred, was that Mesen was a British-Irish, not a specifically Irish occasion; that the element of balance from our perspective was President's reception for the Irish community in Belgium on the evening of 11 November (as you know, the practice inherited from the previous Presidency was to balance British-Irish occasions (seen essentially as developing

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relations with the unionist tradition on this island and/or with the UK) with an Irish community event (seen as essentially nationalist) - on visits to Britain, for example); attendance at the Menin Gate would probably have necessitated the cancellation of the Irish community reception at Louvain. The issue of balance, not just between the traditions on this island but also within the traditions, is a critical factor in our consideration of the programmes for the President's ongoing visits to Northern Ireland, for example.

(3) There did not appear to be any element of reconciliation in the Menin Gate ceremony. The primary purpose of the President's journey to Mesen was to promote reconciliation. The local municipality in Mesen hope that the Peace Park can promote European as well as British-Irish reconciliation. According to media reports, the German Chancellor refused an invitation to the World War One commemoration ceremonies this year essentially on the grounds that they were not designed to promote European reconciliation.

(4) The fact that the Menin Gate ceremony was Commonwealth as well as British raises the issue of our relations with that organisation, which remain sensitive.

(5) For better or worse, the issue of commemoration of the World War dead remains a divisive issue in Ireland, Northern Ireland especially. It seemed to me that if the President were to go to the Menin Gate to commemorate the soldiers of the "British Empire" that we risked a negative reaction among the nationalist community on this island which would have been unwelcome at this stage in the Peace Process and might have overshadowed the reconciliation message being conveyed by Mesen.

(6) On the other hand, by participating in the Mesen ceremony we were making a major symbolic gesture towards the unionist community on this island.

(7) In discussions with Wally Kirwan and the Aras I took the view that the balance of advantage lay in regretting the Menin Gate/Ieper invitation but I made it clear that I was open to opposing perspectives. Mr Kirwan shared this approach.

14. On 25 September, I was contacted by Brian McCarthy and E-mailed the Embassy Brussels as follows:

"He [Mr McCarthy] mentioned that he has shown the programme to the President and she is happy with the outline (this means that the question of the President attending the Menin Gate is now off the agenda and the British Ambassador has been informed accordingly

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by the Aras)".

My recollection is that Mr McCarthy had raised the issue with the President following discussion with Wally Kirwan (who had, of course, already discussed the issue with me) and that the decision not to participate in Ieper was then taken.

15. On 28 September, I was contacted by Wally Kirwan and E-mailed the Embassy Brussels with this message:

> "Wally Kirwan has spoken to the Taoiseach as follows:
> The Taoiseach is happy with the draft programme (including the fact that the President will not attend the Menin Gate function)".

To the best of my knowledge the issue was not raised subsequently.

16. Mr Myers also touches on the issue of the invitation to the Army Band to play at a ceremony in Ieper on the evening of 10 November 1998. As agreed, I am preparing a separate submission on this issue.

Paul Murray
18 November 1998

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