

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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To Secretary
Taoiseach

From W Kirwan, Assistant Secretary

Visits to Belfast and Derry by the President and the Taoiseach planned for 5 and 8 December

1. At about 4.30pm yesterday I became aware of a planned visit to Belfast and Newry by the President on Friday, 5 December, when I read paragraph 7 of the report attached, from the Joint Secretary, Belfast, just then received. Conscious of the Taoiseach's proposed visit to Belfast and Derry on 8 December, I spoke, with Mr Hare, to Mr John Kennedy who informed us of a proposed expansion of the President's programme. I asked that we be given an note of this. This has been received and is now attached.

2. I would be strongly concerned about the likely impact on the Unionists of the close juxtaposition of these two visits. Whatever we may think and despite the private and reconciliation items within it, the President's visit is likely to be seen by the Unionists as a 'nationalist benefit'. If she visits her old school and, possibly also at the Flax Trust, she is likely to meet the M.P. for West Belfast, Mr Gerry Adams. The plans for the Taoiseach's visit, so far as I am aware of them, involve, in addition to the visit to the talks venue at Castle Buildings, visits to West Belfast and to Derry. My understanding is that a strong consideration in the conception and design of the Taoiseach's visit is confidence-building vis-á-vis Northern nationalists, in response to specific requests from Sinn Féin.

3. I would full support such an approach. Moreover, all the elements envisaged for these two proposed visits would be fine if the visits were not so close together. However, in my view, their close juxtaposition, when coupled with the proposed

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programmes, runs a strong risk of upsetting the very delicate rapprochement with Unionists which appears to be under way, largely stemming from the Taoiseach's meeting with the Ulster Unionist Party leadership in London. I believe that steps should be taken vis-á-vis these visits, to minimise the risks involved. It appears that the President's visit is so far 'down the line' that it cannot be deferred now but I would advise cutting out the West/North Belfast elements being belatedly added, largely because Secretary of State Mowlam wants an early morning meeting with the President on 5 December. I think we also need to consider whether we should defer the date of the Taoiseach's proposed visit - say for a week plus. I know that this may run into major diary problems and may be difficult but we need to take seriously the risk of causing difficulties in the talks at a time when prospects are, at last, somewhat brighter.

4. I have also heard suggestions that there is a proposal for the Tánaiste to visit Belfast on 11 December.

26 November, 1997

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