

CONFIDENTIAL

1. PS/Sir R Bloomfield
2. CS6 sub-file



1025/11

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

WHITEHALL

LONDON SW1A 2AZ

cc Mr. Wilson

Sherard Cowper-Coles
First Secretary
British Embassy
Washington
United States of America

Miss M. H. ...

23 November 1989

Dear Sherard,

VISITORS TO NORTHERN IRELAND

I am writing following a meeting we have had recently at senior official level in the Northern Ireland Office about visits to the Province. As you may know, our system for handling these, and making sure we get the best value for every visitor, has been coming under some strain recently. There has been an increasing number of visitors who have been catered for officially, not only of course from the United States, but also from other parts of the United Kingdom and other countries abroad, and the stresses which this has imposed on the system have pointed to the need to think carefully about the importance of each visit, what programme elements it should contain, and its timing.

One visit which threw these difficulties into perspective was that by General P X Kelley and his colleagues this month. This was a group of 30 or so people, including some wives, who arrived on a Friday and left on the Saturday evening. The Secretary of State was not available but nevertheless, the visitors' programme tied up Sir John Blelloch, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, and a number of other very senior officials on the Saturday, and - as Sir Kenneth had indicated when the visit was first suggested in August - there were considerable practical difficulties in setting it up for the week-end. The importance to us of the various group members differed considerably and, with the exception of General Kelley himself, it was not at all apparent, until well into the event, which ones counted and which on the whole did not. Their knowledge of Northern Ireland also varied widely, making them difficult to address as a group.

- 1 -

CONFIDENTIAL

FD/SIL/13740

C O N F I D E N T I A L

As it turned out, the General Kelley visit seemed to go quite well. But we are not sure that it did in fact represent the best possible use of the considerable resources that were devoted to it. If we are to get the maximum value out of our inward visits work - especially now that we are implementing an enhanced visits programme - we need to be as well informed as we can be about the significance and interests of our visitors. We need to be able to take a soundly based decision on which ones merit the most attention and which merit basic courtesy but, perhaps, not much more. Beyond that, there is the question of the notice we get, though we realise of course that some visitors will decide on a visit more or less out of the blue while others - especially perhaps on the greener fringe of Irish-American politics - may actually have a motive for not giving us much forewarning of their arrival. On the most practical level, I have to emphasise that visits over a week-end are extremely difficult to set up (unless of course the week-end is used as a leisure period during a longer visit to the Province). The best time for a visit to Northern Ireland is undoubtedly Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday, when the Secretary of State and other Ministers and senior people are much more readily fitted in to the programme. As you know, the Secretary of State is as a rule simply not available in Belfast after Wednesday midday.

I hope you find this helpful. I should emphasise that my observations are not solely about visits from the United States, but apply equally elsewhere, and we are far from wanting to discourage you from planting the notion of a visit in the minds of suitable candidates. We want the visits - but what we also need is sufficient information, about the visitor, what he or she wants, and the arrival date (and whether it is flexible) to enable us to construct well planned programmes which give the right amount of weight to each visitor.

I should be grateful if you could copy this letter to your posts in the United States. I am also copying this letter to Alexandra Aitken in RID, for circulation as she thinks fit among other Embassies, and to Howard Pearce in Personnel Operations Department, with whom we are running the very useful programme of Northern Ireland briefings for newly-appointed Ambassadors to EC countries. A copy also goes to Roger French in NAD.

Yours sincerely,
Jordan

B A BLACKWELL
Security and International Division

- 1 -

C O N F I D E N T I A L

FD/SIL/13740