

NOTE OF A MEETING

The Foreign Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Tanaiste and the Minister of Justice held a meeting before the plenary talks began this evening. Mr John Chilcot and Mr Sean O hUiggin were also present.

Sir Patrick Mayhew expressed concerns about the Irish President's visit to West Belfast on 18 June.

The Tanaiste said that the President strongly wished to visit West Belfast. She felt that it was a non-political visit. It would be community-based, involving lots of community groups, as most of her visits in Ireland did. This would not be a "Sinn Fein or Provo jamboree". Cancelling the visit would be very damaging to the people of West Belfast.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he could understand perfectly why the President saw it in those terms. It would indeed be a great pity if she did not go to Belfast as arranged. However, what had been envisaged as a private visit was now essentially a public one. Further, about 25 per cent of the people whom she would meet had Sinn Fein associations. That would have a very bad effect on her standing with many of the people in Northern Ireland with whom she had made so much progress. He would inevitably be asked whether the visit was taking place on the advice of the British Government; he would be bound to say that it was not.

Sir Patrick said that a secondary factor was security. He had asked for an objective assessment from the Deputy Chief Constable. The President would be

looked after but there would be an increased risk to the life of police officers because of the short time for preparation. Because of the security arrangements, it would not be possible for the President's visit to be the low key, relaxed event she wanted. Sir Patrick saw that postponement of the whole visit would be damaging. Would it not be possible for the President to postpone that part of her visit relating to West Belfast?

The Tanaiste pointed out that news of the visit had already appeared in the media. The President would argue that, during her visit to Derry, she had met people connected with Sinn Fein; this had not been used to embarrass her. She felt satisfied that Sinn Fein would not exploit the visit to embarrass her or the British Government. The Tanaiste appreciated that the security factor was a worrying point.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that no doubt the President would seek to persuade her hosts that they should not exploit the visit's potential for embarrassment. However, some of the organisations she would meet were known as fronts for Sinn Fein. The President had a unique capability to unite people, a capability which the Government wanted to see fostered; but that would be undermined by the visit to West Belfast. It would be said that the Irish Government had approved the visit. That, too, would adversely affect prospects for the talks. He would be obliged to distance himself from the visit.

In response to a question from the Foreign Secretary, the Tanaiste said that the President wanted to meet the communities in Northern Ireland, along the same lines of similar visits in the south. Would not cancelling the visit be seen as an admission that events in West Belfast were out of control?

The Foreign Secretary said that events in Derry were of a very different kind from those in West Belfast, which was uniquely politicised. Sir Patrick confirmed that the police would be able to keep control, but the short notice and reduced time for preparation meant there was a greater risk to life. British Government Ministers did not associate with Sinn Fein politicians in order not to encourage non-constitutional politicians and undermine constitutional politicians. There was still a lot of dust in the air after the local election. This visit would not be balanced by one to a Protestant area.

John Chilcot said that the security demands were a real concern, although secondary to the political point. No reconnaissance or detailed negotiation over the venue had taken place. There was the risk of a Loyalist incursion.

The Tanaiste asked if shortening the engagement would help? Sir Patrick said that it would have a bearing but not significantly.

The Foreign Secretary asked whether it was impossible, even at this late stage, to balance an abbreviated visit to West Belfast with an engagement in a Unionist part of the City.

Mr Sean O hUiggin said that this would be helpful and wondered whether the President should accompany Sir Patrick when he opened the Argyll Centre in the Shanklin Road area on Friday.

The Tanaiste said that the President felt she could answer all the points raised. She felt that to cancel would set back her bridge-building work and that, because of the trust she had established, she could carry out this visit

successfully too. Cancellation would prejudice moderate people in West Belfast against the British Government.

Sir Patrick said he did not doubt the sincerity of the President's views. But the view of the Government with responsibility for the visit was that it would have very damaging consequences. The British Government wanted to see the President's ability to build bridges preserved.

The Tanaiste said he would convey the Government's views of the security risk to Mrs Robinson.

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