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From the Private Secretary

17 June 1993

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

*Dear John,***VISIT OF THE IRISH PRESIDENT TO WEST BELFAST**

Following his working supper with the Taoiseach on 16 June, the Prime Minister took Mr Reynolds into the study for a private discussion about Mrs Mary Robinson's visit on 18 June to West Belfast. The Northern Ireland Secretary, the Cabinet Secretary, HM Ambassador at Dublin, the Tanaiste, the Irish Ambassador at London, and two other members of the Irish delegation were present.

The discussion lasted for three quarters of an hour. It followed earlier discussion between the Foreign and Northern Ireland Secretaries and the Tanaiste and the Irish Minister of Justice which is recorded in the enclosed note by William Chapman. As the arguments of the second meeting were essentially the same, and as the affair will probably have moved on by the time you receive this letter, I shall not record the after dinner meeting in detail.

Sir Patrick Mayhew set out with some vigour the case against attendance by President Robinson at a community meeting in West Belfast at which Gerry Adams would be present and around a quarter of the guests would be members of Sinn Fein or closely associated with it. He said that the event could do serious damage to President Robinson's unique standing; to the Irish Government's position and role in Northern Ireland; and to the United Kingdom Government's ability to influence the Unionists. He quoted from a letter received from the Lord Mayor of Belfast during the evening which said that HMG would have taken leave of its senses if a visiting Head of State was to be escorted by the RUC to a meeting with Gerry Adams. (A copy of the letter was later given to the Tanaiste). Sir Patrick Mayhew said that, if the meeting went ahead, he would have to say that it had taken place against the advice of the British Government. The Prime Minister endorsed his remarks. He and Sir

Patrick Mayhew made clear that, although we had serious concerns about the vulnerability of the 110 RUC officers who would have to be deployed in West Belfast to protect President Robinson, our main argument was not made on security grounds.

In reply, the Taoiseach and Tanaiste variously argued that President Robinson had now made a series of private visits to Northern Ireland without major difficulty, and had met people associated with the IRA; that the wide respect she enjoyed for her non-political role would protect her from criticism; that the repercussions of stopping the visit at this late stage would be more serious than those of letting it proceed. The Tanaiste said that, following the representations made by our Ambassador, he had seen President Robinson earlier in the day. He was convinced that she would cancel the whole visit if she was unable to go to West Belfast. There was no reason to believe that President Robinson would meet Gerry Adams. The Nationalists would not seek to exploit her visit. The Prime Minister warned that it was bound to be exploited by the Unionists.

The arguments on both sides were made and answered several times without producing a fundamental change in the position. At the end of the meeting, the Tanaiste said that he would convey the very strong views expressed to President Robinson, and (perhaps more in hope than in expectation) that there might turn out to be more fluidity in the situation. The Prime Minister asked that we should be informed as soon as possible of President Robinson's decision. We would have to be prepared to make our position clear, including in Parliament.

Comment

The Taoiseach and Tanaiste were clearly unhappy with the position in which they found themselves; but were not able to make any commitment about their ability to influence President Robinson, whose 84 per cent favourable rating in the opinion polls weighed heavily on them. (Mr Spring commented that we were "dealing with a lady who has walked on water for two years").

After the departure of the Irish party, the Prime Minister and Northern Ireland Secretary discussed the possibility of suggesting that President Robinson should make a strong condemnation of violence in her community meeting, if she could not be deflected from going ahead with it. We may need to look further at this in the morning.

I should be grateful if you and the Northern Ireland Office could provide appropriate briefing for Prime Minister's Questions on 17 June.

I am copying this letter and enclosure to Jonathan Stephens (Northern Ireland Office) and to Melanie Leech (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever,

Roderic

RODERIC LYNE

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office