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30 May 1997

Dear John,

Great Irish Famine Event: Message from Prime Minister

Your letter of 28 May asked for a draft message from the Prime Minister for use at the Great Irish Famine Event on Saturday 31 May (full details in my letter to you of 22 May). We consider that a Prime Ministerial message (rather than a video message from the Foreign Secretary or Northern Ireland Secretary, for example) is the best option to make the required impact and to avoid any impression of a snub. A number of other heads of Government have contributed, either on video or in written form.

The exact use of the Prime Minister's message (draft attached) will be clarified by the organisers today. It will probably appear on a large screen at the event or may be read out by the British Ambassador, Mrs Veronica Sutherland, who is attending the commemoration.

I enclose a sample text sent by the organisers of the kind of message they hope world leaders will send. The text of President Clinton's video message is also enclosed. The draft prepared for the Prime Minister is a little fuller than either, but the Irish would probably expect this, given our role 150 years ago.

The text explicitly acknowledges British failings of the time while making clear that the famine began as a natural disaster. The Irish should welcome this tone - the organisers have been keen that the event approaches the famine in a spirit of reconciliation rather than recrimination, but any attempt by us to skate over the very considerable failings of official policies of the time would be quickly seized upon by Irish commentators. The text includes positive references to the Irish diaspora and to Irish work in the humanitarian field which should be welcomed by an Irish audience.



As you will appreciate, timing is short. I would be most grateful if you would fax the approved text direct to the Embassy in Dublin, as well as sending it back here.

Yours ever,

Fiona

(Fiona Mylchreest)
Private Secretary

John Holmes Esq
10 Downing Street