

30-MAY-1997 14:55 FROM PRIVATE OFFICE

TO

NO 10 P.02/03

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Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

22 May 1997

London SW1A 2AH

Dear John,

Great Irish Famine Event: Request for Prime Ministerial
Video

A televised open-air presentation, styled the "Great Irish Famine Event", will take place in Co Cork on 31 May-1 June to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Great Irish Famine. The organisers have asked the Embassy in Dublin if the Prime Minister would join other leaders in contributing a very short video-taped message for broadcasting at the occasion. The video-tape (of about one minute) would also include the lighting of a candle in commemoration of the victims.

The commemoration of the Irish Famine has been a difficult issue in presentational terms, with a vocal minority in the Republic and particularly the United States determined to vilify the actions of the British Government of the time and place the tragedy firmly in the context of continuing British crimes against Ireland. This is not a battle we can win; it is undeniable that different government policies at the time could have significantly reduced the impact of the disaster. Our approach has been to stress that in no way can the Famine be regarded as deliberate genocide, and to associate ourselves only with commemorative events which approach the issue in a spirit of reconciliation rather than recrimination.

This event is being organised by the Great Irish Famine Trust, a non-governmental body which has received some funding but not official endorsement from the Irish Government. The "Great Irish Famine Event" will consist of a "Gathering" on 31 May involving an open-air stage presentation of Irish history, the departure of a period famine ship and the lighting of a famine candle by President Robinson. Other Heads of State and Government are being invited to participate by similar pre-recorded video-tapes. The following day there will be a live concert ("the Awakening") with contemporary Irish musicians (and Bob Dylan).

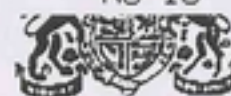
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The Irish and American Governments share our concern that the event should not turn into an opportunity for public recrimination. So far, however, it looks as if the tone will be reasonably positive. President Clinton has contributed a video-tape, subject to an understanding that the event will be non-political. Other European and old Commonwealth countries have also been approached and are considering their response.

Given the fact of television coverage and, more importantly, likely participation by Presidents Robinson and Clinton, British refusal to participate could easily be presented as continuing British reluctance to acknowledge the tragedy. President Robinson's involvement gives some reassurance, as she has consistently concentrated on the positive legacies of the Famine, such as the success of the Irish diaspora and Irish concern for the suffering in developing countries today. A message by the Prime Minister could avoid unnecessarily controversial ground by similarly focussing on the Irish diaspora and the importance of the Irish community in Britain. Against the background of his Belfast speech, the Prime Minister's participation would confirm to an Irish audience his commitment to a settlement and his sensitivity towards events in our shared history.

We therefore recommend that the Prime Minister agree in principle to record such a video. Delivery would be shortly before the event and dependent on confirmed involvement by President Clinton and President Robinson. We would insist that the organisers did not edit it and that it would not be used in any other context. We would also reserve the right to withdraw use of the video-tape if we subsequently decided that the tenor of the event was unacceptable (for example change in format or participation).

If the Prime Minister is prepared to proceed on this basis, we will discuss details with the organisers (including delivery of the candle) and make arrangements for recording the video, including a draft text.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Minister without Portfolio, and to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours tr,

Dominick

(Dominick Chilcott)
Private Secretary

John Holmes Esq
10 Downing Street

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