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Foreign & Commonwealth Office

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227/2 PS | Sir J Wheeler (L+B)
PS | M. Ancram (L+B)
PS | PUS (L+B)
PS | Sir D Fell

McCahavan
Mr Kease
Mr Thomas
Mr Watkins
Mr Keach
Mr Stephen

Dear Martin,

* for advice + draft reply

THE IRISH FAMINE: ECUMENICAL SERVICE

You will recall a proposal by the Irish Government for an Ecumenical Service in Liverpool to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Irish Famine. The idea was most recently raised by Rod Lyne in his letter to you of 12 December prior to the Prime Minister's visit to Dublin.

At that stage we recommended taking a holding line while we awaited confirmation of President Robinson's visit. The subject did not in the event surface, and we have since agreed that President Robinson's visit will take place around 5/6 June.

There are strong arguments in favour of holding a service and, if well-handled, it could contribute to the success of the President's visit. In particular, we understand that President Robinson is considering, independently of Mrs Doyle, how to mark the Famine during her visit, and is thinking in terms of a non-political event. If we are to agree to the Irish suggestion, it would be preferable to be able to propose a format acceptable to us early on in the programme discussions.

If it goes ahead, the Foreign Secretary favours a non-political, ecumenical service in one of Liverpool's cathedrals, attended by the President and, ideally, a member of the Royal Family. Timing, however, looks difficult for both the Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal; we could instead consider approaching the Duke of Edinburgh, the Duke of York, the Duke and Duchess of Kent or of Gloucester. If it proved impossible to secure royal attendance of sufficient seniority we may need to consider attendance by the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister to balance President Robinson's presence.

If royal attendance could be secured, the Foreign Secretary would like to know, assuming that Sir Patrick

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agrees to the proposal, whether he believes the Government should be represented by himself or a Minister from another department: Mr Rifkind himself is unable to attend.

On the negative side, holding a service runs the potential risk of adverse media interpretation, provoking recriminations by Irish nationalists that the Government had not done enough to acknowledge British wrongs, as some would argue, inflicted on Ireland. On the other hand, some Unionist opinion - not necessarily confined to Northern Ireland - might resent even an ecumenical service as going too far towards acknowledgement of responsibility for the famine.

The Foreign Secretary believes we could contain these risks by careful presentation, concentrating on the coincidence of the anniversary with the first visit to the United Kingdom by an Irish President. But in view of the possible risks to the Anglo-Irish (and Unionist-British) mood, he would be very grateful for the Northern Ireland Secretary's views on the proposal, especially given the likely need for senior governmental representation. The Foreign Secretary wonders too whether it might be prudent to sound out Unionist opinion before committing ourselves.

I am copying this letter to John Holmes (No 10), Mark Gibson (Deputy Prime Minister's Office) and Colin Budd (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely,

Dominick Chilcott

(Dominick Chilcott)
Private Secretary

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