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Republic of Ireland Department
FCO

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To: MR WATKINS, D110

Date: 6-12-96

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Subject: PQ

Number of pages: 3
(including cover)

UNDER/SEC 135/12.
-6DEC1996
CENT SEC

ASST 149/12
SEC -6 DEC 1996
CENT SEC

Comments



press state
has been for info, in view of the
we would be on this you
to see .p.m.. Did tried to 6/12
you FCO to say the visit
was a mistake / nothing visit. So
aligning with our own stance.
but the reply had already
gone - no harm. it is at
least entirely consistent
(as you'd expect) with our
positions. 6.2

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King Charles Street
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Fax No: 0171 270 3331

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Problems with transmission?
Please telephone 0171 270 2351/2352

DEPARTMENT *plc fax → Mr Watkins, NIO*

As requested,

Carille Ferris

6/xii.

FO BY WILLIAM ROSS MP (UUP) FOR WRITTEN ANSWER BY THE PRIME MINISTER

To ask the Prime Minister if the present visit to Great Britain by President Mary Robinson is an official visit.

Answer

No.

2
PQ No 718

BACKGROUND

1. President Robinson has visited both Great Britain and Northern Ireland far more frequently than any of her predecessors - she was the first Irish President to pay an official visit to the UK (June 1996) and the first to visit Northern Ireland at all in office. Her current visit to Britain, from 2-5 December, has included receiving an honorary degree from Coventry University, delivering the Rede lecture at Cambridge University and the English Speaking Union's Churchill lecture at the Guildhall.

2. These visits are described by the Irish as private, or working, because she is responding to invitations from local organisations and individuals, not from Government Ministers. Many engagements are, however, clearly undertaken in her public capacity (as this week's visit demonstrates), but rarely, given the executive nature of the President's role, involve official contacts with the Government or Royal Family. On her visits to Great Britain, she is generally met on arrival and departure by an FCO representative and, if the duration and level of her programme warrants it, by a Lord Lieutenant or a Lord in Waiting. In Northern Ireland she is always met at her point of arrival and departure by both the Lord Lieutenant (or his deputy) and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (or his representative). On this particular visit she was met by a Lord Lieutenant and one of the Foreign Secretary's Representatives will attend her departure. Though no other Head of State carries out engagements in the UK in this style, the President has never caused any awkwardness for us, and her ability to respond to British organisations reflects some positive aspects of the unique British-Irish relationship.

3. In recent months Unionists have begun to object to the frequency of the President's visits, especially to Northern Ireland (16 visits since taking up office in 1990, including a number to attend funerals and enthronements of Archbishops). Their concern seems to be that she is behaving as President of all Ireland by not observing formal diplomatic procedures for what are semi-political visits. A recent documentary on local BBC TV highlighted her visits and included comments from Mr Trimble accusing President Robinson of not observing proper protocol when visiting Northern Ireland. His assertions were incorrect: in Northern Ireland arrangements are rigorous on the question of protocol (more so than in Great Britain) precisely to ensure that her visits to another state are seen as such.

Republic of Ireland Department
FCO
4 December 1995

FAX

FROM: V STEELE
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT
Tel No: 01232 528164
4 DECEMBER 1996

TO: MRS K P VINEALL
Republic of Ireland Department
FCO

WILLIAM ROSS PQ ON PRESIDENT ROBINSON'S VISIT TO GB

1. I am broadly content with the suggested background note. President Robinson has visited Northern Ireland 16 times since becoming President; a number of these were to attend funerals and enthronements of Archbishops.
2. We describe the visits as private, and working, where appropriate because she is responding to invitations from local organisations and individuals and not from Government Ministers.
3. A recent documentary on local BBCTV highlighted her visits and in the course of the programme David Trimble, Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party accused Mrs Robinson of not observing proper protocol when visiting Northern Ireland. Mr Trimble's assertion was incorrect.

Valerie J. Steele
VALERIE J STEELE

GR.7750