

RESTRICTED

From: Veronica Sutherland  
Date: 23 October 1995

To: PS.SofS (L&B)

cc: PS.Michael Ancram (L&B)  
PS.Sir J Wheeler (L&B)  
PS.PUS (L&B)  
~~PS.Sir D Fell~~  
Mr Thomas  
Mr Bell  
Mr Watkins  
Mr Williams  
Mr Brooker  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr Leach  
Mr White  
Mr Stephens

Mr Westmacott, Washington - by fax.  
Mr Innes, BIS New York  
Mr Hallett, RAD, FCO  
Mr Lamont, RID, FCO

#### THE FAMINE

1. Your minute of 9 October (Fianna Fail Ready To Go) recorded the Secretary of State's willingness to say something publicly about the Famine, if this would be helpful. He expressed a similar thought at the IGC on 17 October. I have been giving some thought to the possibilities.
2. Earlier this year, the Taoiseach appointed Minister Avril Doyle to coordinate over the next two years a variety of manifestations to commemorate the Famine. These started on 20 August, (the 150th anniversary of the discovery by the then Director of the Botanic Gardens in Dublin of the potato blight). On that day I attended a ceremony in the Gardens organised by the Irish Government and Concern Worldwide, an NGO active in famine relief, particularly in Africa. Since then I have also attended two exhibitions, one a general history and the other on women, Famine and Emigration; and an ecumenical service in Tuam, Co Galway, which the Taoiseach attended and followed with a lunch.
3. The organisers of these occasions have all told me that they much appreciate British interest in their work. None of them, however, has suggested that any formal apology by the British for the events of 1845-9 is called for. On the contrary, those responsible for the ceremonies are concerned to understand the reasons behind the disaster, and to commemorate in a dignified

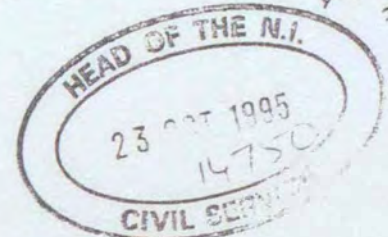
cc JWH:

I think we should encourage the S&S K by in the proposed. If you agree, perhaps you would write something appropriate?

Jell

23/10

(900/10)



PS/Sir J. Fell

Jell has now signed up I'm not so sure. I will not be till in the for a month explaining why he was not. I am not sure such a fine

26.10

RESTRICTED

249



RESTRICTED

manner whose who suffered and died. The only demand for an apology has come from Bertie Ahern, leader of Fianna Fail. This request has been met with widespread ridicule, and several journalists have written contemptuous articles pointing out the inherent impossibility of any Government apologising for a complicated chain of events a century and a half ago. Most observers believe he made his demand in the hope it would rouse support from republican sympathisers. It seems to have appealed only to a tiny majority.

4. I have been impressed by the restraint with which the Government have approached the commemorative ceremonies. I therefore asked Mrs Doyle and a number of experts on the Famine to dinner on Saturday to discuss whether any British involvement might be appropriate, and welcome to the Irish Government. She said she was glad of my approach. She had been considering whether it would be possible to organise in 1996 an ecumenical service in Liverpool Cathedral, similar to that in Tuam, in which perhaps both the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister might take part. She had suggested Liverpool as it was from there that so many of those fleeing the Famine had left for the United States, Canada or Australia. I responded that I thought the idea had many attractions, and would consult London, and let her know when I had a reaction.

5. So that you have some idea of what is envisaged I am sending separately the programme for the ecumenical service in Tuam. You will see that it was attended by clergy from all denominations. Lord Eames gave the address, in which he stressed the need for reconciliation: "We all have a great deal which we must bury in the past - and leave behind us in that past ..... Reconciliation is the word of the moment. But reconciliation cannot be only for the more recent past of our troubles, vital though that may be. Reconciliation must embrace the sins of commission and omission throughout Ireland's history."

6. I recommend that Mrs Doyle's suggestion be given serious consideration: it would be an effective way of acknowledging the past without engaging in a fruitless exercise of apology. As in many respects to the past, educated Irish people seek not an apology but an interest. At the time this was British, not just Irish, history. Could you please let me know what you think.

Veronica Sutherland  
AMBASSADOR

RESTRICTED

250