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PA-642/93

From: Peter Smyth
Political Affairs Division
26 June 1996



Mr. Carson...
Mr. Fie...
S. 28
6..



cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L)* - B
PS/PUS (B&L)* - B
PS/Sir David Fell* - B
Mr Thomas* - B
Mr Legge* - B
Mr Steele* - B
Mr Watkins* - B
Mr Wood (B&L)* - B
Mr Maccabe*
* (without attachments)

in 27.6

PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B

in Carson

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL: SOMME COMMEMORATION, 1 JULY 1996

S. 28

The Minister has accepted Belfast City Council's invitation to the 6..
Somme wreath-laying ceremony at the City Hall on 1 July. I
understand that a copy of the official programme has been forwarded
direct to the Private Office. This note provides some background to
the ceremony.

Background

2. The Battle of the Somme has particular resonances for the
Protestant community in Northern Ireland. On 1 July 1916, the first
day of the Somme offensive, the 36th (Ulster) Division was one of
only a handful of units in the British Army who fought through to
their designated objective, near Thiepval Wood. Absence of support
soon forced them to retreat, and the Division had been decimated by
the time it regained the British front lines. The unit was composed
almost exclusively of Protestants drawn from the ranks of Carson and
Craig's Ulster Volunteer Force, and the loss was felt in virtually
every town and village throughout Ulster. Other units with a local
northern Irish membership suffered comparable losses, but the 36th
came to symbolise the bravery and sacrifice of the Protestants, and
led to the anniversary of the Somme becoming embedded at the heart

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of Unionist culture. Given its proximity to "the Twelfth", it was almost inevitable that 1 July should come to be regarded as a rehearsal for the main Orange celebrations, and Orange parades are traditionally held at various locations on the earlier date.

City Hall Ceremony

3. That is not to say that the City Hall function will have any Orange trappings. It is an informal but dignified ceremony, in which representatives of the churches, the Armed Forces and Unionist political parties participate, and which is virtually an Armistice Day commemoration in miniature. It is intended as a tribute to the Ulster Division from the Lord Mayor and citizens of Belfast, and is conducted with appropriate decorum.

4. The Minister might consider arriving at the City Hall (back entrance) around 10.50 am. He will be met in the entrance hall, and escorted upstairs to the Lord Mayor's Parlour, where the principal guests will be assembling.

5. Shortly after 11.00 am, the Mayor's procession (the City Council plus the principal guests) forms up in the corridor outside the Parlour. The Lord Mayor, the Minister and the Lord Lieutenant for the Borough of Belfast form the front rank of the procession. It makes its way to the Cenotaph in the Garden of Remembrance outside the City Hall. At the wreath-laying, the Lord Lieutenant lays the first wreath, the Minister the second. The Minister's wreath will be held at the City Hall, and carried to the ceremony by a City Hall official. There are no speeches. After the ceremony, which last approximately 30 minutes, the procession re-forms and returns to the City Hall. The Lord Mayor's guests join him for drinks in the Baqueting Hall.

6. Appropriate dress for the occasion is lounge suit (dark).

Political Sensitivities

7. The makeup of the City Council is UUP 15, SF 10, DUP 7, SDLP 9, Alliance 5, Independent Unionists 4, PUP 1. Because of its background, the Somme ceremony has traditionally attracted support only from the Unionist Councillors. The SDLP in the last few years have made a point of attending the Armistice Day service, and last year three of their members (including Alisdair McDonnell in his capacity as Deputy Lord Mayor) also turned up at the Somme ceremony in what was clearly intended as a gesture of reconciliation with their Unionist counterparts, and with the Unionist community at large. If the gesture is repeated this year, it might be appropriate for the Minister to make some acknowledgement of the fact when mingling with the other guests.

8. It would be without precedent if any Sinn Fein Councillors were to be present.

Duration of Visit

9. If, because of the absence of the Secretary of State from the Castle Buildings talks, the Minister feels unable to protract his stay at the City Hall beyond the actual wreath-laying ceremony, it would prudent to broker this in advance with at least the Lord Mayor. This would help avoid unnecessary offence among those Councillors who feel disposed to imagine that Government Ministers pay too little attention to the City Council and its affairs.

10. Attached as Annex A is a fuller political brief on Belfast City Council, and at Annex B are personality notes on the three main office-holders in the Council.

11. I will be in attendance at the City Hall.

(Signed)

PETER SMYTH
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