

DATE FOR ANSWER: 6 DECEMBER 1996

ORDINARY WRITTEN NO 1946

MR ROBERT McCARTNEY (NORTH DOWN): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, what advice he has given to President Mary Robinson about visits to Northern Ireland in 1996; through which channels; and will he make a statement.

SIR JOHN WHEELER

The Secretary of State has not offered any advice to President Robinson about visits to Northern Ireland this year.

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BACKGROUND NOTE

1. In 1993 we agreed a procedure for notification to us of planned visits by President Robinson. Under this we are informed of visits through diplomatic channels ie the UK Ambassador in Dublin, or if the visit is at short notice, by the Department of the Taoiseach. The Secretary of State has given formal advice to the President through the Ambassador only when she went to Whiterock College of Further Education in June 1993, advising against the visit; the visit went ahead but officials were not present, as Mr Adams was. In September 1996 informal RUC advice about the threat to Women Too's premises was relayed at official level to the President via the Taoiseach's office, but the decision to continue with the visit was left to the Women Too Centre, who decided to let their invitation stand following discussions with the local RUC. This does not qualify, in our view, as Secretary of State's advice to the Irish President.

2. To date this year President Robinson has made four private/working visits to Northern Ireland, details of the venues visited are as follows:-

15 February 1996

Lisburn Linen Museum
Unison and Impulse Trade Union
Conference, Slieve Donard,
Newcastle

22 April 1996

Entree 2000 and Belfast Rotary
Club in Europa Hotel
Greencastle Women's Project

12 September 1996

Methodist International
Conference at Stranmillis College
Short Strand Community Forum
Lunch at Hillsborough with
Methodist Conference
Women Too, Broadway
Upper Springfield Development
Trust

23 October 1996

EOC 20th Anniversary Conference,
Stormont Hotel
Methodist College 6th Form
Ulster Museum Irish Fashion
Exhibition

Since her election as President in 1990, President Robinson has visited Northern Ireland on 16 occasions.

3. The Unionist Parties dislike the treatment afforded to President Robinson as a Head of State. They do not recognise the visits as 'private', and further argue that there has been a discernible change in Irish Government policy on visits by the President to Northern Ireland since President Robinson took office. This was expressed in a letter to the Secretary of State in July 1994 by David Trimble MP, who wrote to ask about the treatment afforded Head of State visiting the UK. A recent documentary on local BBC TV highlighted her visits and in the course of the programme David Trimble accused Mrs Robinson of not observing proper protocol when visiting Northern Ireland.

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4. All of the visits made to Northern Ireland are at the invitation of local groups or bodies (voluntary/community/women's): they are not at the request of the Northern Ireland Office. That is why, in FCO taxonomy, they are described as private/working visits (as opposed, for example, to State or Guest of Government visits) - even though they are undertaken in her public capacity.

5. President Robinson, in line with the standard FCO protocol accorded to Heads of State on private/working visits to the UK, 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).

Answer prepared by Miss Steele x28154

In her absence please contact CAU x28191

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