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A/895/89/BH

FROM: R O MILES
US(Pol)

20 October 1989



cc PS/MofS (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B 2/ ✓
1. PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr Burns - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Spence - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr A P Wilson
Mr Bell - B
Mr J McConnell - B
Mr Len Brown, DENI

PS/SofS (L&B) - B

GAELIC SPORTS

The Secretary of State asked for advice on whether he might attend a Gaelic sporting event.

2. On balance I strongly recommend that he should. Gaelic sports are an important manifestation of the life of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. (I speak as an expert, having seen Co Tipperary beat Co Mayo at Camogie, and having played one of the less painful sports myself in my youth).

3. There are difficulties however. The main one, as ever, is security; some locations would be altogether impossible, and even at best there would be problems about a heavy security presence, given the nature of the event and the involvement in Gaelic sports of the extremist Republican element. A second difficulty is the rule in the Constitution of the Gaelic Athletics Association excluding members of the security forces from membership. This rule goes back to the year dot, and is of course a symbol of just those divisions in Northern Ireland society which we would like to break down. I am sure that the way to break them down is to go ahead, not to wait for the GAA Constitution to be amended.

Recommendation

4. In view of the difficulties I suggest this should be taken slowly. I would like to consult further in particular with Dr Maurice Hayes (the NI Ombudsman) who is prominent in Gaelic sports. I also suggest that before going ahead, the Secretary of State might mention to the GOC and the Chief Constable the point about the GAA Constitution.

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I attach a background note and a letter from Sir N Fenn about his recent attendance at the All-Ireland Hurling final, which gives some of the flavour (though Gaelic sports in the North are even more problematic than Gaelic sports in the South). I am sorry the background note is longer than I would have wished, but I understand this submission must be with the Private Office today and, as the man said in the story, I did not have time to write a shorter one.

[signed]

R O MILES

Ext 507 (SH)



Mr T J B George
RID
FCO

BRITISH EMBASSY,
DUBLIN.

5 September 1989

Dear Timothy

ALL IRELAND HURLING FINAL AT 'CROKE PARK

1. I report for the record that I attended the Final of the All-Ireland Hurling Championship at Croke Park on Sunday 3 September.

2. We had recommended that a NIO Minister should consider attending since Antrim was contesting the final for the first time since 1943, in order to demonstrate our even-handed interest in the sporting activities of both communities in Northern Ireland. Dr Mawhinney preferred not to do so and had in any case a previous engagement. The question then arose as to whether I should go. The NIO was sceptical and the FCO helpfully agnostic (not an invitation to further theological debate!).

3. We telephoned the GAA and asked if I might attend: I had been looking for an opportunity to witness hurling at senior level; as Ambassador to Ireland, I should familiarise myself with such a central part of Irish life; I was not trying to make a political point - I thought it might be fun; I would not press the point if it would cause them any embarrassment. After three days of horrified silence they produced a courteous letter of invitation and four complimentary tickets.


4. I learn (from the improbable source of the Leader of the Irish Labour Party) that the GAA were thrown into confusion by our approach. Although one of my predecessors (Sir Ian MacLennan 1959-64) had been a regular and enthusiastic patron of hurling, there was no record of a British Ambassador attending since that time. Some members of the Cumann had objected in principle: others had not wished to snub me; others again had simply thought why shouldn't he come? Mr Spring said that the question had been referred for resolution by the Taoiseach!

5. In the event I was received with courtesy. My neighbour in the VIP enclosure was Dr Michael Woods, Minister for Social Welfare, who explained the intricacies of the game to me as I went along. At the reception following the game I was able to talk to senior members of the GAA, to President Hillery, to Des O'Malley, to Alan Dukes, to Commissioner Crowley, to

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Lt General Tadgh O'Neill, to Cardinal O'Fiaich and multitudinous senior clergy (including Dean Victor Griffin of St Patrick's Cathedral, apparently the sole representative of the Church of Ireland). I also met former Taoisigh Jack Lynch and Liam Cosgrave and several members of the present Cabinet. The Taoiseach himself went out of his way to say how glad he was to see me there.

6. Hurling is a fast and exciting game and it was played with great skill (otherwise people would have got killed!). Antrim were no match for Tipperary and were outclassed from the beginning. The Tipperary wing forward (fortunately named Nicholas English!) was a veritable Houdini, scoring points with unerring accuracy even when surrounded by three or four saffron jerseys. But Antrim never gave up. The final score was decisive but not humiliating: Tipperary 4-24: Antrim 3-9 (to the Sassanach 36-18).

7. Two demonstrators climbed to the roof of one of the stands and displayed a long banner inscribed in English and Irish "No Extradition". They ignored repeated appeals over the loudspeaker to come down in the interests of their own safety. They were summarily removed by the Garda Siochana at half time.

8. The GAA invited me to come back to Croke Park for the Irish football finals on Sunday 17 September. Alas I cannot go - because I shall be reading the lesson at St Patrick's Cathedral for the Annual Service in Commemoration of the Battle of Britain. Irish irony!

9. There was little publicity for my attendance: a photograph and caption in the Irish Press recorded my presence without comment. This is as it should be. Dick Spring tells me that some of the GAA feared that I would seek to present myself as the Ambassador for Antrim. Of course I made no such point. The smiling face of Neil Kinnock is in all the morning papers because he attended the match at the end of his meetings with the Irish Labour Party (which we are reporting separately). Unusual prominence is given to his presence at Croke Park because of his escape from a serious motor accident on his way to the airport. Irishmen know that there was a British interest in their hurling final.

10. As it happens, I was at Lords on Saturday for the final of the NatWest cricket championship, and at Croke Park on Sunday: the tribal rites of two nations at one weekend.

11. Not a very important story. Nevertheless a marker has been put down and a precedent established and one more small Anglo-Irish barrier has been broken.

Yours ever,

Nick

cc

Nicholas Fenn

Mr Brian Blackwell
SIL NIO(L)

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