

1. Mr ~~Chesterton~~⁸⁷
2. Mr Masfield

cc PS/sofs (B) - M
 PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M
 PS/PUS (L&B) - M
 Mr Bloomfield - M
 Mr A W Stephens - M
 Mr Burns
 Mr Innes - M
 Mr Bell
 Mr Blackwell - M
 Mr Hamilton
 Cent Sec - M

ADVANCE NOTIFICATION TO NORTHERN IRELAND MP'S OF MINISTERIAL VISITS

1. Thank you for your minute of 24 April.
2. To take the general point first, existing guidance about the notification of MP's is clearly inconsistent, as you say. As I understand it, it has been the general practice to give local MP's no advance warning of NIO Ministerial visits, at least since November 1985, largely for reasons of security (including the difficulties of controlling demonstrations). These reasons would seem still to hold good. We might wish to review the practice in due course, perhaps after a general election, in the light of the political and security climate at the time. Certainly, it would seem desirable to consult the RUC about any general change in practice, if that were to be proposed.
3. It has also been the general practice, I understand, for other government departments' Ministers not to notify MP's about visits to Northern Ireland (although I am unaware of any specific instructions to this effect - no doubt, however, Ministerial private offices here are invariably aware of such visits). Certainly, it has been the recent MCD practice not to notify constituency MP's of visits by their Ministers. Mr Maginnis was therefore not informed in advance of Mr Younger's visit (although the press evidently were, as Mr Maginnis may know).

4. Arguably, the same considerations which lead us not to notify MP's in the case of NIO Ministers' visits apply to visits by other Ministers, although the risks of demonstrations may in some cases be less. It would be difficult, if asked, to justify one general practice for NIO Ministers and a different one for other Ministers. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to explain to Mr Maginnis that there is a 'security' difficulty about telling him in confidence shortly before a visit by Mr Younger. From their point of view, the GOC and MOD officials would not, I understand, see difficulty in giving Mr Maginnis such advance warning. This might be a courtesy which the Secretary of State would be prepared to see extended selectively, pending a review of the position after the next general election. In such a timescale the risks of accusations of inconsistency may not be great.

5. This is a rather complicated matter. Any general change to our existing practice needs, I suggest, to be thought through quite carefully and appropriate instructions then issued. For the present, I recommend that we keep the options open in a helpful way in the reply from Mr Younger to Mr Maginnis. The attached drafts are designed to do this.

6. There remains the question whether we should seek to remove the inconsistency in existing Whitehall guidance. It might be appropriate to offer a gloss on the recent Cabinet Office guidance to the effect that special considerations apply in the case of visits to Northern Ireland, and your office should be consulted before any notification of constituency MP's takes place. That should ensure that future practice is properly co-ordinated.

7. The Secretary of State will wish to consider the attached drafts. It would also be helpful to know whether he agrees that we should be prepared to invite Ministers to reconsider the general position on notification of Ministerial visits, after

the next general election; and whether we should now arrange for a note of guidance to other Whitehall departments, on the lines suggested in the preceding paragraph.

B. C. Kirk

D C KIRK

April 1987

1 May

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DRAFT LETTER

FILE NUMBER

ADDRESSEE'S REFERENCE

To	Enclosures	Copies to be sent to
PS/Secretary of State for Defence		cc PS/Mr Scott (L&B) Mr Chesterton Mr Innes Mr Bell Mr Kirk Mr Blackwell Mr Hamilton Cen Sec
(Full Postal Address)		(Full Address, if Necessary)

LETTER DRAFTED FOR SIGNATURE BY

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE
(Name of Signatory)

Mr King has seen a copy of the letter of 10 April from Mr Maginnis to Mr Younger, on which you sought our advice. Mr King believes it is important that, in replying to such letters, colleagues should make clear that individual MP's cannot drive wedges between the NIO and other departments of government. For example, Mr Maginnis, who has been boycotting NIO Ministers, should not be offered meetings with other departmental Ministers to discuss matters concerning the NIO, at least not without a NIO Minister being present. Nor should he be allowed to get away with the suggestion that the NIO somehow decides policy in isolation from the rest of HMG.

The principal complaint in Mr Maginnis' letter - that he was not notified in advance of Mr Younger's visit - poses some difficulty. It has been the general practice in the NIO for some time not to notify MP's of impending visits by NIO Ministers, for security

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reasons. I understand that the MOD have been following the same practice. However, the local press were given such advance warning in the case of Mr Younger's visit, and I understand that MOD officials have advised that it may be appropriate to give similar advice to Mr Maginnis in confidence in the case of any further visits, depending on circumstances at the time.

Mr King believes that it is important that the NIO and other departments should follow a co-ordinated approach to the notification of MP's about Ministerial visits, and he proposes to review policy after the next general election. We shall also consider whether any general Whitehall guidance needs to be issued. In the meantime, we should be most grateful, if, when a MOD Minister is about to visit Northern Ireland, his Private Office could consult with this office about whether the local MP or MPs should be notified in advance and, if so, when.

The attached draft letter to Mr Maginnis takes on board the points made here and we hope that it will be a useful contribution to Mr Younger's reply.

E.R.

DRAFT LETTER FROM DEFENCE SECRETARY TO MR KEN MAGINNIS MP

Thank you for your letter of 10 April about my recent visit to Northern Ireland, including my visit to the UDR. I am sorry, however, that you felt it necessary to write in the terms that you did.

Both I and my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office do care profoundly about the security situation in Northern Ireland - particularly at the present time. We shall continue to give all possible support to the security forces, who have been carrying out their tasks with great bravery and professionalism. Those of us in Government can, I hope, understand the feelings of your constituents that you have expressed.

I am sorry that you were not notified in advance about my recent visit. It has long been the general practice to restrict advance information so far as possible about Northern Ireland visits by Ministers, for reasons that I am sure you will understand. I can assure you that no discourtesy to you was intended, by me or by my advisers.

Since you wrote we have had the debate in the House on 6 May about the current security situation in Northern Ireland. If, following that debate, you would wish to put further points to Ministers, I know that Tom King would be happy to meet you. I am sending a copy of this letter to him.