

## **Freedom of Information Request 0787-14 Digest:**

### **Press Lines – 19 June 2014**

#### ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY / LORD HOWELL'S VISIT TO DUBLIN

If raised:

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association. Whether Ireland wishes to become a member is a matter for Ireland to decide. The UK has no special privileged role in deciding questions of membership.

4. We anticipate that any publicity about Lord Howell's visit may prompt speculation the UK is encouraging Ireland to join the Commonwealth, particularly after the recent State Visits in each direction. If Ireland wished to become a member, it would need to express its interest to the Secretary-General, and the matter would be decided by Commonwealth Heads of Government collectively. We have not approached the Irish government to encourage an application.

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### **Extract of speech by Rt Hon Hugo Swire MP: 31 March 2014**

25. Should we be pressing others to join us? For example, wouldn't it be wonderful to see Burma accepted into the Commonwealth family? Or even the Republic of Ireland.

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### **Internal FCO email**

**Sent:** 12 March 2014 15:32

[Names Redacted Section 40]

**Subject:** General debate on the Commonwealth: additional supps / information

#### **Ireland's Commonwealth Membership**

1. Ireland was an independent Commonwealth member from 1921 until 1949. Its membership was based on its having become independent from the UK in 1921 as a Dominion, and hence it remained in the Commonwealth based on its common allegiance to the Crown. (This was the basis of Commonwealth membership in those days.) When Ireland became a republic in 1949 it left the Commonwealth. Ireland's becoming a republic predated the decision, later in 1949, to permit India to remain in the Commonwealth on becoming a republic; at the point that many refer to as the birth of the "Modern Commonwealth". (As opposed to the "British" Commonwealth.)

2. Although Ireland formally left the Commonwealth in 1949 on becoming a republic, it had actually ceased being an active member after De Valera came into power in Ireland in 1932. Ireland did not formally withdrawal from the Commonwealth at that point, in deference, De Valera claimed, to unionist sentiment. Despite its lack of active membership after 1932, the

remaining Commonwealth members continued to regard Ireland as a member up until its formal withdrawal in 1949.

[Redacted – Section 27]

### **Lines for Mr Lidington**

4. I suggest the following. You'll see that I've suggested that you/Commonwealth team add in the background on [Redacted] potential Commonwealth membership, as I don't want to contradict what you might be giving elsewhere in the briefing.

#### Lines

- Ireland was an independent member of the Commonwealth from 1921 until 1949, when it left on becoming a republic.

- [Redacted] This is not the case with other Commonwealth members. But the criteria for Commonwealth membership have changed considerably since 1921. So drawing comparisons between the Irish experience [Redacted] may not be helpful.

#### Background

Ireland became an independent member of the Commonwealth at independence in 1921. As a Dominion it had Commonwealth membership on the basis of its common allegiance to the Crown. This was the only basis for Commonwealth membership at the time. Ireland left the Commonwealth in April 1949, upon becoming a republic. It was not until later in 1949 that Commonwealth members decided to allow republics to join the Commonwealth. This followed India's desire to become a republic and to remain a Commonwealth member.

Although Ireland formally left the Commonwealth in 1949, it had not been an active member since De Valera came into power in 1932. (He claimed not to have sought withdrawal from the Commonwealth then out of deference to unionist sentiment.)

[Redacted – Section 27]

[Names Redacted - Section 40]

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### **Internal FCO email**

**Sent:** 12 March 2014 12:35

[Names Redacted Section 40]

**Subject:** General debate on the Commonwealth: additional supps / information

[Names Redacted - Section 40]

**Subject:** General debate on the Commonwealth: additional supps / information

[Names Redacted - Section 40]

Following the oral brief with Mr Lidington for the debate tomorrow, I wanted to check that the extra issues he mentioned are covered in the supps pack. Grateful for action as follows:

- Ireland – has it ever been a Commonwealth member [Redacted]

[Names Redacted - Section 40]

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**Email from British Embassy Dublin to Whitehall**

**Sent:** 11 March 2013 15:55

**To:** [Names Redacted – Section 40]

**Subject:** Re: TAOISEACH IN LONDON - LSE

Asked whether Ireland would rejoin Commonwealth, T replied didn't see Ireland rejoining Commonwealth but acknowledged support Ireland received from various Commonwealth offices.

[Names Redacted – Section 40]

**Sent:** Monday, March 11, 2013 02:26 PM

**To:** [Names Redacted]

**Subject:** RE: TAOISEACH IN LONDON

<http://www.merrionstreet.ie/index.php/2013/03/speech-by-the-taoiseach-mr-enda-kenny-t-d-british-irish-chamber-of-commerce/>

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**Sent:** 09 June 2010 12:46

[Names Redacted – Section 40]

**Subject:** Ireland/Commonwealth: Reform Group

[Name Redacted – Section 40]

1. Members of "The Reform Group" (Redacted – Section 40) called on the Ambassador on 3 June. The meeting was at their request. They set out their organisation's objectives and work to date. I had earlier attended on 12 May the Dublin launch of their book: "Ireland and the Commonwealth: towards membership" (a collection of articles, speeches and reports) at which Independent Senator David Norris spoke. The organisation's website: <http://www.reform.org/> provides more details.
2. The Reform Group members explained that they saw the issue of Irish membership of the Commonwealth as carrying an all-island dimension. Many of their members were also involved with The Irish Association, which promotes North-South co-operation. They were keen to stress that they saw themselves as facilitators and similar to a think-tank rather than a lobby group.

3. We discussed some of the cultural and historical sensitivities surrounding the issue in Ireland. Obviously, the UK was a strong promoter of the Commonwealth family and core principles. But we noted that any decision on Ireland (re)joining was clearly a matter for the Irish Government and we had not (not) been approached by them. [Redacted – Section 41]. Reform asked about the possibility of marking Commonwealth Day in Ireland. The Ambassador asked if they were in touch with other Commonwealth Embassies present in Ireland. They were particularly interested in approaching the Canadians, Indians and South Africans.
4. We confirmed willingness to be kept informed of the Group's activities and to provide any information or assistance at our disposal. We offered to facilitate an introduction to the Canadians. We also agreed to check with contacts in the FCO to see if there was any material concerning the economic benefits of Commonwealth membership. We noted that Amitav Banerji of the Commonwealth Secretariat had already made a contribution on this theme to the Group's book.

Comment

5. [Redacted – Section 27]

Kind regards,

[Name Redacted – Section 40]

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