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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

21 July, 1993

Confidential

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

Dinner with Michael Ancram

The new Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Michael Ancram, came to dinner here last evening. As you know he has Ministerial responsibility for Education, Arts and Culture, Community Relations, and assists the Secretary of State in political matters.

We have already reported exchanges on Lord Tebbit's remarks on Sky Television (my SF 916).

Situation at Westminster

We took the opportunity to set out our concerns on the possibility of a deal between Unionists and the Government on tomorrow's Maastricht vote which might preempt discussion and agreement in the 26 March 1991 process and so cast doubt on its future. Ancram did not seem to think there would be a deal with the Unionists or anyone else; and he said candidly that it would not be in the Government's interest to make one. It would set a bad precedent. Those bought off once would seek to be bought off again and again over the rest of the Parliament's lifetime when there might be twenty votes just as critical or more critical to bargain about.

Political Talks

Ancram has been in Northern Ireland before, as long ago as 1968 when he met John Hume. He stresses however that he is reading himself in and that initial contacts with the parties here are on a getting-to-know-you basis. He has still not been able to see Ian Paisley even on that basis but expects to do. He described his own approach as middle of the road. He believed in trying to get something which all the parties here could agree on, rather than seeking to impose something. That approach simply would not work.

In reply, I said that he who stands in the middle of the road may be run down by the bus! More seriously, I thought his

analysis too simple. The Unionist parties, the DUP most emphatically, were showing no sign of wishing to return to the table. In those circumstances, it was not necessarily a question of imposing something on them, rather of trying to draw up a framework agreement that could be acceptable to the great majority and seeking to draw the parties into it. Ancram acknowledged the distinction but said anything associated with the two Governments would be rejected. We thought it would be completely wrong to take that idea as a given. The important point was not who presented the framework agreement - perhaps it could be done by the British - the important point was the substance; it was vital that the two Governments should be agreed on that. John Palmer in the Guardian had presented a telescoped analysis drawing on the Tansiste's words to suggest that the parties might have to be bypassed but the Tansiste had said we had to try to bring in the parties and that going directly to the people would be a "Beechers Brook" which implied, first, that this was a fence to be jumped only if we arrived at it, and, second, not something to be considered lightly, rather to be considered with the utmost care. (Comment: one little noticed remark in Mayhew's "Inside Politics" interview last Saturday was that he could not visualise any circumstances in which he would want to go for a referendum over the heads of the politicians, adding "I think this is much too far down the road").

Ancram accepted the point about the DUP but said he had hopes of Robinson. He would pursue his informal chats with the parties and, interestingly, if he found them totally unwilling to return to the table, then we would indeed have to look at other ways of proceeding.

I complained about British Ministers' reaction to the Guardian article, saying that it had greatly contributed to the controversy and to notions of anger, rift and so on. Ancram said these were the inventions of journalists; they did not reflect briefing. They had had to face the facts of the situation and they had tried to steer a middle course. If they had suggested any sympathy with the thrust of the article, Unionists would have been outraged. At the same time, they had not wanted to offend us and he thought the discussion at the Conference, both at lunch and in the plenary, was conducted in a friendly spirit.

Broadcasting

I explained the history of the issue of RTE reception in Northern Ireland and the more recent question of Telefis na Gaeilge and asked him to take a personal interest. He said that the briefing given to him suggested that the only obstacles in the way were technical ones. I said if that was the only problem, the issue could have been settled years ago; there were other considerations involved also. I was confident that the technical issues could be resolved and, if there was political backing from Ministers, that we could make

progress. I pointed out that the Northern television stations now reached everywhere in the South and apart from the desirability for awareness and confidence-building of a mutual exchange of TV and Radio broadcasts, there was also the point that whereas UTV could advertise throughout the South, RTE could not do the same throughout Northern Ireland.

We hoped he would be delegated to deal substantively with the matter at the next Conference or that the Minister or Ministers in the Department of Heritage/Trade and Industry would attend the Conference to do so. The Minister was noncommittal but sympathetic, saying if we brought obstacles to his attention he would examine them seriously.

Arts and Culture

The Minister gave the impression that he had won his political spurs so to speak by rejecting our proposal for reciprocal membership of the Arts Councils. He may have done so, however, on the basis of a misunderstanding. He said he had been briefed that in addition to the nominee we had put forward under the Agreement and whom he had appointed (Professor Welch), we also wanted a statutory member of our Council on the Northern Council and vice versa. His own experience was that a single statutory member frequently became marginalised and isolated.

I said we had not mentioned the word statutory to my knowledge. What we wanted was an arrangement, which could be informal, where a member of our Council was a member of their Council and a member of their Council was a member of ours. Artistic endeavours knew no borders in Ireland and creative people North and South were accustomed to mixing with each other. He was wrong to think from his experience in Britain that reciprocal members would be marginalised. Moreover, if that was his concern in relation to a single individual, why not have more than one reciprocal member? I pointed out that there is no statutory limit on the numbers of the Northern Council and that there was no reason why he should not increase the present complement of 15. He acknowledged this point and said he would reflect further without, however, saying he would change his mind. I got the impression, perhaps wrongly, that the new Chairman of the Council, Donnell Deeney, might have expressed doubts about the proposal to Ancram. It would be desirable to speak to him again.

I said the Minister for Arts and Culture, Mr Higgins, was very keen on the idea of reciprocal membership and would certainly be pursuing it.

I thought it might be useful if the two Ministers met - perhaps in Galway? - before the substantive discussion in the Conference. It might help to ease the way on the issues in which we are interested.

Public Appointments

The Minister has a role in a large number of public appointments, so we took the opportunity to explain our dissatisfaction with our success rate and to emphasise the importance to us of comprehensive and timely information about vacancies and of the need to be informed if any new elements came into play at the time of Ministerial decision. We said that his predecessor seemed to us to be misled at times on these matters as Mr Atkins had appeared to be at the last Conference. We explained the background to Mr Atkins' mistaken remark that our nominees were not always appropriate to the job, on the basis that, in one case, we had nominated a man when a woman was required. I have written to my opposite number, Martin Williams, on this matter.

Education

We had some discussion of education issues, including the complaints of the CCMS in respect of historical underfunding of Catholic schools. The Minister said he was aware of the argument but faced another one from the Protestant side saying that they now wanted their own CCMS because of a feeling that they had had to surrender their schools with no advantage to them (?) whereas the Catholic side had not.

We drew the Minister's attention to a report by Liam Andrews on the reform of the curriculum made in the 1989 Education Order and concluding that it had been negative (see Mr O Riordain's report of 4 July). The Minister did not seem to be aware of it. He told us he was already of the view that the number of core subjects was too high; and he was conscious that they might be having an adverse impact not just on Irish but on other optional subjects. I mentioned that what seemed to be happening now, according to Liam Andrews, was precisely what had troubled the late Cardinal O Fiach when the issue was under discussion a few years ago. | X

We mentioned a startling statistic that some 27% of Northern Ireland secondary students leave school without any qualification. He said he was aware of that statistic. He believed it was due to the selection or streaming process that obtained here and which was popular with parents. On the average, students did less well at the bottom, but better at the top; and although it ran against the grain of Conservative policy in Britain, he might have to consider aiming more to the middle. He said his information was that the unqualified school leavers did not tend to come from one community rather than the other.

Personal

Michael Kerr (pronounced Karr), Earl of Ancrum, is the heir of the Twelfth Marquess of Lothian, a title created in the early eighteenth century, he told us with a smile, to buy the vote of his ancestor for the union with Scotland. His own title is

920/5

5

older and was achieved on the back of profits from cattle stealing! He described himself as the first Catholic Tory MP in Scotland which surprised us. The family served the Stuart monarchs but was Protestant for a long time; it became Catholic at the turn of the century. He is married to Jane Fitzalan-Howard, daughter of the Duke of Norfolk the premier Catholic peer of England, but he has no English interests other than a house in Wiltshire in which lies his present constituency of Devizes.

He is a Scottish advocate and a former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office 1983-87. His Ministerial career was interrupted when he lost his seat in Scotland in the general election that year. He came back last year as member for Devizes. His interests are listed as skiing, photography and folk singing. I understand in his youth he was a skier of champion class and still pursues the sport. He has not brought his camera to Northern Ireland (I warned him he could be prosecuted under the emergency legislation for taking a photograph of practically anything!). He takes his guitar playing and folk singing seriously and has busked his way through Italy and France in his time. He is a keen Bob Dylan fan.

All in all, he struck us as a deeper, brighter and perhaps more independent man than his predecessor Jeremy Hanley. He does not have the same back-slapping joviality but he has a sense of humour and we found him good company.

Scotland

One of the reasons he thinks Scotland, unlike Ireland, has been happy with the English connection is that it started in the modern era with a Scottish takeover, ie, the union of the Scottish crown with the English in the person of James I. Scotsmen poured into London to join the Court and make their fortune, including an Ancram ancestor who joined Charles II later in his French exile. We noted that Scotland had done very well out of the Empire but now that the Empire was no more, was there an edginess in the relationship? Would Scotland prefer to reassert its independent statehood and European role? Not surprisingly, the Minister thought not, although he was by no means emphatic. He believes the Scots are too cautious to make a clean break or go down that road. The greatest political surprise of his life was the result of the Callaghan Government's devolution poll when despite the expectation of a certain win for the devolutionists, Scotland split three ways between pro, anti and don't know. He said he had been sitting in a television studio asked to put the best face on the expected result for the Tory party only to find himself required to comment on a completely different verdict.

We said his experience might be relevant to Ireland where referenda had not always gone as expected, to put it mildly. That was indeed a reason why both Governments had to be confident of approval before putting anything to the people

920/6

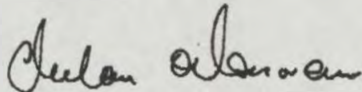
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North or South as the outcome of the political talks. The Minister took the point, although Mr Williams and Ms Collins of the British side argued that in the North a combination of the UUP, SDLP and Alliance party would easily defeat an opposition led by Sinn Fein and the DUP. We said if it were a simple matter of adding up the adherents of these parties, that would be so, but it was not the whole point. Any outcome would be a delicate balance and a campaign led by Adams on the one side and Paisley on the other could exploit the fear of Unionists and Nationalists alike that a proposal was not in their interests.

Lastly, in response to a question, he said sectarianism was a thing of the past in Scotland. Even the football chantings were meaningless relics (Catholics at Rangers and Hearts - if there are any - might not agree). He thought similar progress could be made in Northern Ireland.

I briefed Ambassador Small on the main points of this discussion prior to his lunch engagement with the Minister in London today.

Yours sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary