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Extract from Report of Dinner with
Minister Ancram from the Joint Secretaries (Declan
3 O'Donovan), 13 July 1994 547/4

will recall that Ancram, in his capacity as Minister for Education, declined our proposal for reciprocal membership of the Arts Councils.

I do not know what ground for manoeuvre our Minister for Agriculture may have, but it would certainly be very desirable if a vacancy could be created for Mr. Nicholson. I doubt if any thing short of that will prevent this incident being thrown in our faces for a long time to come.

Cabinet reshuffle

Ancram was confident that the Prime Minister would announce his reshuffle very shortly, probably next Monday. He was also confident that neither he nor the Secretary of State would move; they were "waterproofed". It does seem unlikely that the Prime Minister, especially given his own close interest, will want to disturb what is seen as a very steady political team, but he has other problems and it may be that either Ancram or Mayhew will be moved to solve one of them. In Ancram's case, it seems likely that he would only be moved on promotion to the Cabinet, which would be a remarkably fast rise in this Parliament and would probably be at the expense of one of a number of other Ministers with recent NI experience, notably Jeremy Hanley, Richard Needham and the relentlessly self-promoting Brian Mawhinney.

Ancram did not extend the "waterproofing" to his other Ministerial colleagues in the NIO; he was silent about them. They are all recent arrivals and on that account could be expected to stay, but one or more of them may go for different reasons. Minister Wheeler is seen within the NIO as something of a maverick; he has thrown the occasional liberal spanner to useful effect from our point of view. All in all, even among those who like him, there is a feeling that he has not yet adapted from longtime backbencher to officeholder in Government. Tim Smith has acquired a weak reputation which we will have a chance to judge for ourselves when, or if, he comes here to dinner next week. Baroness Denton could be moved for an entirely different reason. She has managed to acquire a reputation for competence, decisiveness and hardwork. She is well liked to boot, at least outside her Department (some civil servants have suffered at her hands). The Prime Minister might decide he needs a woman with her talents in London.

Political Situation

The main message Ancram gave was a constitutional one: we must change Articles 2 and 3. Most importantly, in the light of exchanges to date, we must change Article 2 and the nature of the change must pass the Corfu test which I gathered was set by the Prime Minister at Corfu. The test is along the lines "has the territorial claim been dropped and will people believe it has been dropped?" We did not go into detail on the proposals now being discussed but I did take the

opportunity to emphasise that our approach was not a narrow one but rather one that emphasised the sharing of the territory of Ireland by all the people who lived there.

In relation to his own talks with the parties which are nearing an end, I said that a very important issue which remained to be threshed out was what parity of esteem and equality of treatment would actually mean in Northern Ireland. I did not think that either the British side or the Unionists had fully faced up to what would be involved by way of political change and I felt that this issue could well eventually surpass both the constitutional issue and the question of the powers of the North/South constitution in difficulty of resolution.

Ancram said the main thing was that the balance of the overall settlement must be even; he believed that Unionists were prepared to go a very long way, further than we thought, provided they did not have a sense that the board had tilted against them and that they were inevitably on the road to a united Ireland. I agreed that it was important that both sides should have the psychological sense of equal treatment but he should bear in mind that Unionists would be left in possession of this non-tilting board. They would be the ones left in the State they wished to live in whereas Nationalists would not. Our acknowledgement of Unionist misgivings about the future should not obscure that basic reality. At the most fundamental level, if equality of treatment was to mean anything, Nationalists must have the sense that a united Ireland was a practical possibility at some time; they must not have the sense that it was being relegated to fantasy. Neither should they have the sense of returning under the Unionist heel; rather they must have the sense that they had prescribed the terms under which they would accept the reality of British rule for the foreseeable future. The ethos as well as the new administrative arrangements within Northern Ireland would, therefore, be all important and, as yet, I had seen little evidence that the British were prepared to face up to the challenge of equal treatment.

Ancram seemed to assume that the Summit arranged for 22 July would go ahead (there have been suggestions to us by officials that it might not, in view of the unfinished nature of the joint framework document). He thought it might not be such a bad thing if the document were not fully agreed, if it had a number of square brackets or different options which the parties could consider; but he did consider that it must be clear on the constitutional issues which were for the two Governments alone; any uncertainty on them would make the whole thing unworkable.

I noted the recent statement by Molyneux and other comments we had heard from within the UUs to the effect that Articles 2 and 3 had been built up far too much, that they were unforceable anyway and there should be no question of paying a high price for their amendment. Ancram did not take this

seriously. He said there were people in the UUP who wanted Articles 2 and 3 to remain as a convenient bolthole in case they came under pressure in other areas, notably the North/South institution. It was vital to take that bolthole away; otherwise, there was not likely to be much progress with the parties.

I was in the House of Commons recently for the renewal of direct rule debate and I had a conversation on the terrace with Ancram afterwards. I noted that he had been very brusque in his treatment of Paisley and I said it seemed he had given up all hope of bringing him into his round of discussions (Ancram seemed to persist with this hope long after others had seen it as unrealistic). Ancram said he had given up such thoughts some time ago. He agreed that if the SDLP, UUP and Alliance were seen to make progress towards agreement with the two Governments, the DUP might want to buy back in but he was unsure. Some in the DUP certainly would but others would be opposed. If they carried the day, which was very possible, he foresaw the DUP going into opposition in a new assembly controlled by the SDLP and UUP. They would probably be joined in opposition by Sinn Fein. The Minister seemed to doubt that Sinn Fein's position on violence would clarify to the point where they could be admitted to power; or possibly that even if it did clarify, that it would be some time before the UUP could bring itself to cooperate with them; in the last case, the political contact people in the NIO have reported some encouraging attitudes within the UUP to cooperation with Sinn Fein at local level and an apparent desire by Sinn Fein for such cooperation (see Mr Bassett's letter of 28 June).

Springvale Campus

I raised again with Ancram the question of the University of Ulster proposal for a campus at Springvale in West Belfast (see my letter of 16 June and my SF 541 on our conversation with the Vice-Chancellor, Trevor Smith). Although he did not admit to sending out negative signals on the idea, arguing that he could have scuppered it before it was announced but had not done so, it seemed to us from Ancram's response and demeanour that he is not a supporter. I went through the arguments in favour of the project again. He acknowledged them but spoke of the amount of money involved, the likelihood that any indication of support from him would cause people to knock at his door for money which he did not have, and the other proposals from QUB which ought to be considered. I said that Ulster University thought that the proposals for QUB campuses in Armagh and Tyrone had come very late in the day and looked like spoilers rather than real initiatives. The Minister thought we should talk to Gordon Beveridge about them. Other than that, his formal position was that he had not in fact been notified by the University of the decisions of its Senate and Council, although of course he was aware of them from reports (Sean Farrell made this point to Trevor Smith who called him on the matter yesterday).