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9 May, 1994.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo Irish Division.

Handwritten: ~~Mr. Seán O hUiginn~~
~~Mr. Murray~~
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Mr. Murray
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10/5

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Conversation with Michael Ancram, M.P.
Minister of State at the N.I.O.

Michael Ancram was our guest at lunch in the Embassy today. He was accompanied by his private secretary, Keith Jagelman. I was joined by Joe Hayes.

The following points of interest arose.

The Ancram Process

Ancram spoke about his bilateral dialogue with the parties in terms which will be familiar to you. He had nothing new to report since the last IGC on 25 April. He told us of his personal optimism for the future based on these contacts. It is clear from much of what he said that his focus is primarily on what can be achieved in a Strand One scenario, although he fully acknowledges that the three Strands are inter-dependent and that there cannot be agreement in Strand One until we have agreement on what is possible in Strand Two. There can be no question, he said, of trying to "bank" strand one before moving on to the second strand.

He clearly prides himself on being a pragmatic politician with an eye for what is possible in any negotiating framework. He consistently emphasised the need to distinguish between what the parties were free to say in private as opposed to what they felt constrained to say in public. More should not be asked of them than it was possible for them to deliver. It was obvious that he had in mind the OUP. He repeatedly told us of the need to coax them along, to provide them with reassurance and to develop their self confidence.

He stressed his strong conviction that the only way progress could be maintained, particularly if new talks got underway, was if absolute

confidentiality could be guaranteed. We said that from our point of view an imaginative, radically new approach was required that would enable the minority to identify with and support institutions of government in Northern Ireland for the first time. Strong North/South institutional links would also be required.

The Unionists

He clearly thinks very highly of his Unionist interlocutors, especially Jeffrey Donaldson whom he sees as representing the bright hope of the younger generation of Official Unionists. We suggested that Donaldson, Empey and Nicholson, the three OUP representatives he is dealing with, represented only one strand of Unionist opinion. Ancram accepted this but reminded us that they were all chosen by Molyneaux personally and as such had to be viewed as representing the leader's views.

Ancram spoke warmly of Molyneaux, quoting approvingly from his well known observations about the futility of high-wire circus acts. Ancram believes that what Molyneaux means by this expression is the need for the two governments to concentrate on what is realistically achievable. We pointed out that Molyneaux's well known abhorrence of high wire acts could hardly be divorced from his narrow and basically integrationist agenda of a select committee, abolition of the Order-in-Council System, improved local government structures and "good neighbourly relations" with Dublin.

Ancram sidestepped the wider point but responded that the Select Committee would wither on the vine in due course in the event of there being a substantial measure of devolution. Abolition of the Order-in-Council System was surely a desirable objective for any democratically inclined politician. On the issue of local government reform he was prepared to accept that of itself it could never be a sufficient objective for a settlement, although it dealt with issues vital to the well-being of local communities. We reminded him of the appalling sectarian record of local councils in Northern Ireland in the past and the reasons why the MCRory reforms in the early 1970s involved the removal of much of the powers hitherto exercised by local authorities. Ancram admitted that from his own experience in Scotland he knew how divisive the functions of planning and roads can be at local level.

The Friends of the Union Speech

Ancram spoke about his recent speech to the Cambridge meeting of the Friends of the Union. He sought to reassure us about his references in that speech interpreting the Peter Brooke phrase that Britain had no strategic, selfish or economic interest in Northern Ireland. The point he had sought to get across to his audience was that Britain's interest was not a colonial one.

He situated his appearance at the Friends of the Union meeting in the context of his responsibility to provide re-assurance to Unionist opinion. There had been about 50 at that particular meeting and he had been well received although closely questioned on the intentions of the British Government. The only one who had gone away dissatisfied was the representative of the Ulster Tories who was in any case a dyed-in-the-wool integrationist!

The Liaison Group

He was greatly heartened by news of the intensive and useful work being pursued in this arena. He agreed with us that until after the European elections and the marching season, indeed probably until the autumn, there was little realistic likelihood of getting the talks process re-started. It was therefore all the more necessary for the two Governments to press ahead at their level. The parties accepted this in their contacts with him and depended on the two Governments keeping the momentum going. In this context the work of the liaison group was absolutely vital. When asked how an agreed paper might be used he reacted quite cautiously, saying that it would be necessary to examine its contents very carefully first before judging how best to deploy it.

The Domestic Scene

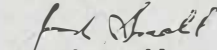
As had his colleague, Sir John Wheeler, a few days previously, Ancram took a decidedly optimistic view of the Prime Minister's future. Personally he felt that it would be prudent to delay any action on a cabinet re-shuffle until after the dust had settled following the European elections. To rush into a cabinet re-shuffle now would only be grist to the mill of the media who were clearly out to destroy the Prime Minister and the Government at any cost. It would be more judicious to delay a reshuffle for some weeks. The new Ministers would then have the benefit of the recess to become familiar with their portfolios and to prepare for the hustings of the Party Conference in October.

In Ancram's opinion there was no one who could successfully unite the various strands of opinion within the Conservative party in a way that John Major was able to do. To select a new leader now would be to divide the party hopelessly between right and left and between the pro Europeans and the Euro sceptics.

We commented on the Prime Minister's personal commitment to the search for a solution to the Northern Ireland problem. Ancram agreed fully, remarking that Major's view was that the situation in Northern Ireland represented a problem that no politician, British or Irish,

would tolerate if it were taking place in his constituency. He went on to note that a change of leadership could rob the peace process of momentum since none of those identified as possible successors had a personal interest in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



Joseph Small
Ambassador.