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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH
BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

Ms Ryan

PST. PSS. Messrs. Teahon, Donlon & Dalton, Ambassadors London & Washington; Joint Secretary; Counsellors A-I

Confidential

8 April 1997

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

Ms Finnegan
R.CC
Ms O'Flanagan
Mr O Cuaig
Mr. McKee
8.4

Dear Second Secretary

Dinner with Michael Ancram

Michael Ancram was our guest for dinner in the Secretariat last night.

He is in Northern Ireland for a couple of days in between campaigning activities in his West Country constituency and also in Scotland He was in relaxed and affable form, accepting philosophically that the Conservative Government has run its course while extolling at the same time the efficiency of his own re-election efforts.

Ancram claimed that, on the doorsteps of his own constituency at least, there is nothing to indicate a basic ideological conversion to Labour (on the lines of e.g. the 1970 switch to the Tories) The mood seems to be more one of wanting change of some description. He suggested that it would be easier for the Conservatives to respond to this (by exploiting fears of the unknown) and that Labour's lead might not ultimately be as dramatic as some have predicted.

He described to us his own programme of house-calls to as many as possible of his 81,000 electorate. Having made a selection on the basis of potential Conservative sympathies, he is

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endeavouring to call personally to each house. To save time, he runs from one to the next (a campaign practice, he told us, which has yet to be emulated anywhere else in Britain). Devizes is a relatively safe seat for the Tories and he seems confident of victory.

We had a lengthy discussion of the prospects for a restoration of the IRA ceasefire and for an inclusive talks process which would bring about a comprehensive settlement.

We also reviewed the history of the talks to date, which involved an extensive revisiting of the British Government's position on decommissioning. Responding to our criticisms about the paralysis which this has produced, Ancram held that this was an issue which could not have been avoided - and which, he suggested, had been prefigured both in the Tanaiste's remarks of December 1993 and in the clarification document of May 1994 (we disputed the former suggestion, recalling the context of the remarks). He also claimed that, even if the Conservative Government had had a substantial majority over the past two years, it would have taken the same stance on decommissioning - though probably closer to the position outlined in the Mitchell Report, he acknowledged, than to Washington Three.

Looking back on his four years in office, Ancram was not unduly despondent about the failure to make more political progress. A point which he emphasised frequently was that the essential starting-point is a consensus between the two Governments, the SDLP and the UUP on the way forward. If one or other of these players withdraws its support, nothing can be done. With all involved, there is at least a prospect of recruiting others over time and moving towards a comprehensive accommodation.

Ancram also underlined the need to maintain the present talks structure intact - "if it collapses, it could be five years before we get it back again". At the same time, however, he suggested that undue haste to make progress could be damaging (as it would frighten the Unionist horses). The secure settlement we are all looking for may take many years to negotiate.

We questioned a number of points in Ancram's analysis. While accepting the need for consensus among the players he had mentioned, we suggested that any sign of diminished British Government commitment to a fully inclusive talks process would be deeply prejudicial in terms of achieving lasting peace in Northern Ireland and, accordingly, a stable settlement. Ancram replied by asserting his own continuing commitment to inclusivity and emphasising the amount of time he had devoted to trying to achieve this (he claimed to have spent cumulatively more time with Sinn Fein than with any other party during his term in

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office).

We reiterated our reservations about a British proposal, floated at the last Liaison Group, for a "time-lock" arrangement whereby, to bypass the decommissioning obstacle, Sinn Fein would be excluded for a fixed period from the talks if they had not entered them by a given date. Ancram indicated that this was not a doctrinaire position on his Government's part and that they would be open to alternative ideas which we might wish to put forward for movement past this obstacle following the resumption in June.

As regards the Unionists, we highlighted the essential contribution to be made by the British Government in steering the UUP into a more constructive mode. A decision by British Ministers, for whatever Parliamentary reasons, not to place the UUP under any significant pressure in this regard would not only mean continuing stalemate in the short term but could be fatal to the prospects of achieving agreement in the longer term. The British Government had a unique capacity, and responsibility, to guide the Unionists towards accommodation (as we had seen e.g. in Jim Molyneaux's relatively constructive response to the Joint Declaration).

Ancram responded with the familiar line about the British Government's inability to deliver the UUP, as the experience of the talks to date would have shown, and the counter-productive effects of placing them under pressure. He suggested that it has been no less difficult for the Irish Government to deliver its own "client" in the peace process, Sinn Féin. We dismissed the analogy, emphasising the immeasurably greater burden of bringing a party with Sinn Féin's background into democratic politics.

We also suggested that, with or without Sinn Féin, the present process could implode if it did not shortly reach substantive negotiations. One of the biggest problems facing the process is the inertia caused both by the prolonged procedural debates and the stalemate over decommissioning. There is an urgent need for momentum to avoid complete atrophy and, as the Taoiseach has made clear to the Prime Minister, this will have to be supplied by the two Governments when the talks resume. Ancram was in agreement with this but again underlined the limits of his Government's persuasive impact on the Unionists.

Ancram echoed Sir Patrick Mayhew's positive remarks about John Taylor over dinner here recently. He praised Taylor's pragmatism and willingness to take risks and, while ruling out a possible coup against the present leader in the wake of an indifferent electoral performance, he suggested that Taylor is biding his time to move against Trimble in due course.

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Sinn Féin entry

While recognising that the Aintree incident and the IRA's other recent activities have significantly increased Sinn Féin's credibility problems, we regretted nevertheless that the British Government have not so far felt able to present in positive terms the prospect of Sinn Féin entering the talks on 3 June if a ceasefire were called in the near future and the requirements of the ground-rules met. We suggested that Mo Mowlam's recent signal to this effect was helpful and an improvement on the more equivocal formulations which Ancram and the Secretary of State have been using.

Ancram saw Ms Mowlam's presentation as consistent with the Government's basic approach. She had said "could" rather than "would" (despite Senator Kennedy's suggestion that the latter had been used). He believed, however, that her use of the formulation in question had been inadvertent and not a calculated signal to Sinn Féin. She had, he suggested, been led into a trap by the interviewer (Jim Dougal), who had endeavoured to lead Ancram in the same direction on the programme a week earlier. She had since sought to "make a virtue out of necessity", but was probably slightly relieved when Aintree provided a context for a retreat.

We suggested that it should still be possible for the British Government, in the as yet private correspondence with John Hume, to give a positive presentation on the lines of what our Government, Ms Mowlam and Senator Kennedy have all suggested. Ancram suggested that the British Government's position, which emphasises the legal obligation on the Secretary of State to invite Sinn Féin participation once the requirements have been met, is, if anything, more helpful from Sinn Féin's point of view - in that, if a ceasefire were declared now, it would be theoretically possible for the requirements to be considered met, and entry facilitated, even before the resumption on 3 June. He presented the calculated vagueness on a time-period as an asset rather than a difficulty. We pointed to the widespread suspicion in the Republican movement that the imprecision on timing would enable the British Government to stall indefinitely on Sinn Féin entry if political interests at Westminster dictated this.

Ancram went on to suggest that the Irish Government would also need some time to form its judgement about the quality of the ceasefire. Furthermore, the intelligence at its disposal would have a crucial bearing on the British judgement, in that weapons development, training and other activities are more likely to occur in our jurisdiction and the input of the Garda Siochana would, accordingly, be awaited with interest by the British authorities. We suggested that our Government would not rely exclusively on security assessments, though

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these would be important, but would take a whole range of factors into account in reaching its judgement on the reliability of the ceasefire. We recalled that, while training and other activities had continued during the last ceasefire, there were no breaches of the ceasefire prior to Canary Wharf. We hoped that, in the event of a restoration, security advice would not be the sole determinant of British Government policy in this matter.

Hume/Adams

We touched briefly on the current correspondence with John Hume.

Ancram said that, following their meeting of 26 March, the ball is in Hume's court and he has not heard back from the latter. He indicated a general willingness to offer further clarification of points which are at issue and seemed in no particular hurry to bring the exercise to a conclusion. He was also, in contrast to the Ministerial worries about "secret negotiations" which his officials reported at the last Liaison Group, more open than we expected to the argument that, for a number of reasons, publication would not be desirable.

We impressed on Ancram the opportunity available to the British Government, even at this late stage in its term, to create an opening for a renewed ceasefire through the answers it provides. Ancram promised that the Government would not abandon its efforts and hinted that something closer to the positive presentation on entry which we are seeking could yet be provided. He also emphasised that, however late in the Government's term a prospective ceasefire might arrive, the Secretary of State (as a "pernickety lawyer") would submit it immediately to the required tests and fulfil his statutory obligations to the letter.

Conservative Party

Noting Ancram's frequent references to the effective cooperation between the two Governments, we expressed some surprise at the conspicuous omission of this dimension from the Conservative Party's election manifesto. Revealing that he had written most of the section in question, Ancram described it as a "political document" which he had drafted in some haste (and cleared with the Secretary of State during a ten-minute interval at the last IGC). Deciding that the Tories had no hope of attracting nationalist voters, he had focussed on basic Unionist anxieties about consent and accountability. The same concerns, he indicated, had dictated the deletion of references to Anglo-Irish cooperation and the key

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documents agreed in recent years. We suggested that this omission would be taken by many as confirmation of their worst suspicions about the present Government and its commitment to parity of esteem between the two traditions in Northern Ireland.

Looking ahead slightly, Ancram said that the Conservatives would wish to maintain bipartisianship with a Labour Government on Northern Ireland He expected, however, that there would be pressures within the party, once it entered Opposition, to move to the right. We enquired about the leadership's readiness to resist these pressures. Ancram replied that everything would depend on the size of the margin between Government and Opposition. The shift might be barely perceptible if the Government had only a small majority but quite profound in the event of a landslide victory Ancram saw this as the inevitable consequence of a party losing the control over its wilder elements which it possesses while in Government.

More generally, the Conservatives would be endeavouring to keep a Labour Government under sustained pressure on Scottish devolution during its first year - to the point, Ancram suggested, where the Government would find it hard to contemplate making any other significant constitutional moves. He thought it likely that Labour would be less ambitious, once in office, on the subject of reform of the House of Lords.

A Labour Government

Ancram expects that, if Labour are elected, Mo Mowlam will be Secretary of State for Northern Ireland only for the first year or so, at which point she will be moved to an economic portfolio. He saw signs of Paul Murphy being appointed as his own successor, though Murphy could also go to Sir John Wheeler's job. He thought it likely that Roger Stott would also receive a Ministerial appointment.

Arson attacks on churches

Ancram indicated that there would be a strong statement today by the Secretary of State today condemning the recent spate of arson attacks on churches here (comment: this has just been received and is being forwarded separately). On the Harryville protest, British Ministers had hitherto maintained a low profile in order not to exacerbate a very volatile situation (Ancram had wished to attend Mass there on a number of occasions with his wife but had been dissuaded from doing so). However, the burning down of places of worship

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marked a new low in community relations, as a difficult marching season approached, and had to be unequivocally condemned.

Concluding reflections

Ancram, who had paid only one previous visit to Northern Ireland (in order to collect folk-songs), mentioned some initial unease about his Ministerial appointment four years ago because of his ignorance about the problem and the security implications for his family. For the latter reason, he is not unhappy that he may shortly be leaving his post. Otherwise, however, he regrets leaving what has proved to be a fascinating portfolio (which has made him the longest-serving political affairs Minister since direct rule).

He is proud of the achievements of the peace process, even if some have proved short-lived, and of three key documents agreed between the two Governments with which he was involved - the Joint Declaration, the Framework Document and the ground-rules for the talks. He believes that the settlement towards which we are all working will have to be "in or around" the Framework Document, though "the packaging may have to be disguised". Finally, he indicated some cautious confidence that a settlement of this kind could be achievable within the next decade.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Joint Secretary

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