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Subj: Meeting between Minister Ancram and SDLP on 4 September

1. I have received the following read-out from the British side here of the meeting which Michael Ancram had with John Hume and Seamus Mallon yesterday evening to discuss resumption of the talks. Minister Ancram was accompanied by David Watkins, David Hill, Chris Maccabe and Alan Whysall.
2. The position in summary was that the meeting had been "constructive, but unfocused". The SDLP were less pessimistic than before the summer, were anxious to press on with talks but also anxious that they should deliver quickly, for fear of the drift of nationalist opinion to Sinn Féin.
3. The British side had found Mallon as "looking better" and taking a more positive approach than in July. Hume too had been positive, but at times had seemed "slightly distracted".
4. Ancram began with reaffirmation of the commitment on the British side to the talks process: its collapse would leave a dangerous void. Hume and Mallon said they had made the same point strongly to the Irish; the alternative was street politics. Hume had emphasised that it was however important to move to the real issues quickly (those he characterised as "agreeing institutions for Northern Ireland", and "relationships with the South" - one of several references that struck the British as a rather more Unionist-friendly formulation than usual).
5. Mallon acknowledged that attitudes had hardened, and that willingness to compromise had been reduced, on both sides. This was particularly so among nationalists - there was a strong feeling that the talks were going nowhere. Hume spoke of much-increased middle-class support for Sinn Féin.
6. Mallon said that the events of the summer meant that the SDLP had a much shorter time to show their community the talks could produce a settlement. Hume suggested a time-frame of six months to resolve matters. Ancram floated, informally, the idea of a review of talks progress by the participants at some point, to seek to move issues forward.
7. Ancram said it appeared that on all sides participants had to convince each other that they were serious about the talks. There were strong Unionist concerns. One was the perennial fear of the slippery slope to a united Ireland. Hume said the Unionists always believed he had something up his sleeve. They should realise on the contrary

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how much matters had moved their way. They would certainly not, for example, have had ten years ago SDLP agreement to the proposition that any settlement had to be approved by a vote within Northern Ireland. He mentioned the meeting with the UUP today.

8. On decommissioning, Ancram outlined unionist fears that the issue would be perpetually dodged. They needed substantiation of the Mitchell scheme - confidence had to be built on both sides. They had come a long way on this - he drew attention to John Taylor's statement before the summer endorsing "partial decommissioning on a mutual basis". Hume thought decommissioning was a non-issue - paramilitaries could give up arms one day and re-equip the next. Mallon was content to see the appointment of a sub-committee. However, he wished to avoid the making of regular reports back to plenary which, since guns could not be got off people, would endlessly catalogue failure.
9. On the comprehensive agenda, Mallon was anxious for discussion to be as brief as possible. He was content with the "broad headings" approach, and, for example, the substitution of "constitutional issues" for anything that opened Unionists to allegations of "negotiating the Union". The simpler the better. Indeed Hume had gone further and suggested bare headings based on existing text, such as "relationships within Northern Ireland and their institutional expression" for Strand One. There had been no demur when Ancram had suggested the comprehensive agenda might be considered in the Business Committee.
10. Mallon said that the first week of talks would be very important. In the interests of getting to the real issues, might there be a gentleman's agreement to avoid opening statements altogether? (It was not clear he intended the consequence that the talks would restart with the address to decommissioning.)
11. He was much concerned about the position of the Loyalist parties. The affair could finish the talks, and show that the political process was not capable of solving Northern Ireland's problems. Ancram had outlined, as he had to the UUP, rule 29, and the necessity for it to be operated fairly. Mallon hoped the issue could be kept out of the talks until later, when representations had been received.
12. Hume and Mallon both hoped the talks could be made to operate more briskly and effectively. Might the Governments not urge the Chairman to tighten up the proceedings, to avoid interminable debate? Ancram spoke of the difficult position Senator Mitchell had been in before the sufficient consensus rules had been endorsed. Mallon suggested that in large gatherings, such as there had been before the summer, Unionist speakers were anxious to play to the gallery. A reduced format would be much better. But it must be a rule that participants were able to commit their parties in such formats if they were to be effective. The SDLP had been bruised by agreements reached with the UUP and later disavowed.
13. Ancram mentioned that it might be necessary to contact Hume and Mallon over the weekend. (Both are likely to be at home, with Mallon skipping BIA to prepare for talks.)