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Political Progress (pre '98)
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1st October 1993

Dear John,

I greatly valued our confidential talk in the middle of last month during which, on a strictly non-committal basis, we explored your party's position on a number of issues relevant to the political Talks. As I explained to you then, I am currently holding a round of discussions to explore and define areas of common ground or disagreement. The idea behind this is that, should we succeed in bringing about the Talks, we would already have available to us a relief map of the parties' positions so that we would not need to go over old ground and could immediately get down to substantive discussions.

If you agree, I very much hope that we can meet again within the next couple of weeks. There are a number of issues on which I should welcome further clarification. In Strand 1, for example, you were prepared to contemplate a separation of powers involving a Commission as well as the Assembly - although you made it clear that you would not accept "external" Commissioners. I should find it helpful to hear any views you might have on the respective division of responsibilities between the Assembly and Commission; should the Commission, for example, be able to ratify legislation and/or to influence the administrative actions of the Assembly Committees or Heads of Department; should it have a role in appointing Heads of Departments? Might this assist in promoting consensual policies and protecting minorities? It would be useful to explore more fully your views generally on the relationship between the Assembly, Commission, Departmental Committees, Chairmen of Committees and

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Heads of Departments. This would include the merits of Chairmen being Heads of Departments.

I should also like to hear whether you have any more specific suggestions with regard to the role and status of North/South institutions. If I understood you correctly, you did not envisage such institutions having an autonomous position but rather that they would obtain their mandate (including legislation and finance) from the Assembly and Dail (and would report back to them). At the same time they might be given some degree of delegated authority over a narrow range of issues such as tourism. I should like, if you are content, to go on building up a clearer picture of how these institutions might work.

I should also be interested in your views on whether there might be ways of accommodating the concern underlying the concept of external commissioners in a different form, most likely within the Strand II or Strand III arrangements. There is a obvious disagreement between the SDLP and the other parties about the requirement for external involvement in Strand I institutions and I should like to explore whether there might be any scope for meeting the SDLP's concerns in an entirely different way, which would be acceptable to the other parties.

You also mentioned very helpfully the importance of security issues in any overall outcome. As I understood it you were opposed to the Mallon agenda but were prepared to consider the principles underpinning it. You floated the notion of an equivalent to Interpol. Again, this is an area which I am sure deserves further exploration; I should be interested to hear whether you have developed any further ideas since we met.

These are the main areas on which we might concentrate; no doubt we would also get into other issues as the discussion developed. If you are happy to have a further meeting perhaps you would get in

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touch with my office. As before, I would emphasise that I would regard the meeting as strictly confidential, exploratory and totally without commitment.

Yours sincerely
Michael

MICHAEL ANCRAM MP
Minister for Political Affairs

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