

① Sir Ewart (5/3/82) 3
 ② Miss Davies 21/3
 Mr. [unclear] p/17

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SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH MR SCOTT TO DISCUSS THE MAIN REPORT OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW GROUP - 9 MARCH 1982

Those Present:-

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| Secretary of State | Mr Marshall | Mr Carvill |
| Mr Scott | Mr Wyatt | Mr Cornick |
| Sir Ewart Bell | Mr Gilliland | Mr Pope |
| Mr Parkes | Mr Blatherwick | |

Mr Scott explained that there were two main points on which decisions needed to be made in advance of publication of the main report of the Higher Education Review Group (HERG). These were:-

- a. the future of the New University of Ulster (NUU);
- b. future arrangements for the co-ordination on Higher Education in Northern Ireland.

Mr Scott reviewed the recommendations made by HERG in their main Report and explained that these had been discussed at length in the Department of Education and with the Northern Ireland Office. As a result, it was proposed that the recommendations on the future of the New University of Ulster which suggested a change of role, should not be accepted. Neither, as an alternative should closure of the New University be considered since the implications for Northern Ireland and the North-West of the Province in particular were so great. Mr Scott said that it was possible that closure would prove in the long run to be more costly than retention and would bring additional problems since as well as redundancy payments for staff, Government would be faced with the problem of finding an alternative use for, or disposing of, the Coleraine site. It had to be said that there was no obvious alternative use for such a large and specialised complex.

2. Mr Scott went on to explain that two alternatives had emerged from discussions. These were:-

- a. a merger of NUU with Queen's University, Belfast - this had been rejected since it would result in a domination of higher education in Northern Ireland by Belfast;

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b. a merger with the Ulster Polytechnic. This would have the advantage of retaining a centre of gravity for education in the North-West of the Province and of securing a role for Magee College in Londonderry, and was, therefore the recommended course.

3. In response to the Secretary of State's query about the likely reaction of the Ulster Polytechnic, Mr Parkes said that he believed Mr Birley would react favourably. The reaction of NUU would depend on how far they were prepared to accept the Government argument that the only alternative to a merger was closure. Mr Scott reinforced this by pointing out that if the recommendations of HERG were accepted, the numbers enrolled at NUU would be even lower than at present, and NUU could not be viable on this basis. A school of thought at NUU felt that an increase in the number of students enrolled might come about through increased enrolment from students who would otherwise have sought places in British Universities. It was clear that this could only be, at the best, a short-term answer. The Secretary of State and Mr Scott then discussed the way forward, and reviewed the arrangements that would need to be made if a merger between NUU and the Ulster Polytechnic were to go ahead. Mr Scott explained that the existing close links between the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the Department of Education would be strengthened as a basis for planning the future of the new institutions. Legislation would also be necessary and the new institution would have to be provided with a new Charter. Funding would continue on the basis of parity with GB, with UGC providing advice. HERG had recommended what was in effect a new Quango to fulfil this role but this recommendation was thought to be at least in part based on Sir Henry Chilver's scepticism about the value of the UGC.

4. Sir Ewart Bell supported the proposal for a merger between NUU and the Ulster Polytechnic. He was clear that there was no easy option, neither was there one clear-cut desirable option. It would not be easy to defend a closure of NUU and Government's aim should be to find a way of keeping it open on a viable basis. In his view the recommendations of HERG did not meet this requirement. He accepted that NUU itself would wish to sit tight in the hope of attracting more students from Great Britain, but accepted that this too was not an acceptable long-term solution. The DENI proposals were much more sensible, in that they enabled NUU to remain open, but they would be opposed and would, no doubt, generate a lot of argument. However the concept was sensible and Government could stand by that. It would be important however when announcing the proposals

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to give them the maximum possible thrust, so that the arguments and the alternative were clearly understood. Mr Marshall supported Sir Ewart Bell pointing out that the Government would be accused of replacing a first class Polytechnic with a second class University. He was pleased to see that both UGC and the Department of Education and Science had given their support to the proposals. The Secretary of State felt that UGC might have greeted the proposal with some relief since closure of NUU might have been seen by them as the first step downwards on a slippery slope. He too felt that the main thrust of criticism might be that Government were taking steps to secure the future of NUU at the expense of the Ulster Polytechnic. Mr Parkes pointed out that this argument was unlikely to get far without the support of the Rector of the Ulster Polytechnic and that he was confident that Dr Birley would favour the proposal. The reaction of Queen's University was also likely to be favourable. The reaction of the Vice-Chancellor of NUU was much more difficult to assess - it would not be surprising however, if he were to throw his support behind the HERG proposals and call for no reduction in student numbers.

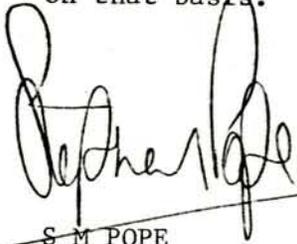
5. The Secretary of State then gave his agreement to the implementation of the proposals put forward by Mr Scott and the meeting moved on to consider how best the announcement of the Government's view of the HERG proposals might be made. Mr Scott suggested that a letter might issue to Sir Keith Joseph with copies to other members of 'H' Committee asking them to agree to the proposal without the need for a meeting. Mr Marshall undertook to speak to the Cabinet Office to ask them if they could see any objection to the proposal being dealt with by correspondence. After consideration of how best the announcement of the Government's reaction might be made to Parliament, it was agreed that Mr Concannon and Mr Molyneaux should be approached and told that the Government proposed to make the announcement with the suggestion that this should be done by means of a written rather than an oral statement. The HERG report would be discussed in the Northern Ireland Committee.

PRESENTATION

6. Considering how best the Government's proposals might be presented Mr Gilliland suggested that the Government's intention to keep NUU open and to maintain Magee College were plus points which could be attractive to present and he felt that the proposals would make a great deal of sense to most people. It would be useful to open with a robust statement on the day of issue of the HERG report with press conferences (possibly in both Belfast and London on the same day) and television

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interviews. Further thought might be given to the Government's approach were Dr Birley to go public in favour. It was agreed that Mr Gilliland should go ahead on that basis.



S M POPE
PS/Mr Scott

15 March 1982

cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B)
PS/Ministers (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir Ewart Bell ✓
Mr Parkes, DENI
Mr Marshall
Mr Burns
Mr Wyatt
Mr Gilliland
Mr Barry, DENI
Mr Blatherwick
Mr Carvill, DENI
Mr Spence
Miss Wilkinson
Mr Shepherd