

20 July 1982

Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

I would like to commend the attached paper from William Waldegrave.

The closure of colleges, like the merging of regiments, is, as he says, a sad moment for those involved.

He suggests an attractive method of softening the blow of absorbing the smaller colleges of London University into an enlarged King's College.

Somerset House is one of the finest buildings in Europe. Michael Heseltine and Paul Channon have done superbly to put the Courtauld collection into the great rooms on the Strand front.

What could be better than to complete the process by housing the expanded part of King's in the remainder of Somerset House? It would be cost-effective; it would provide a university courtyard of a beauty unequaled outside Oxford and Cambridge; and it would be a delight to the academic and non-academic world alike.

! ? Naturally, there would be delicate problems with the Inland Revenue and the Lord Chancellor's Department, although some staff might welcome a move to more modern office premises. I am convinced that the gains would outweigh the losses.

*Jm*

FERDINAND MOUNT

*I too would like to consider W.W.'s points further.*

*Richard Tye has been created in polythene for your comment soon be turned into steel. Copied with the relevant funding down Whitehall - they could conceivably house the I.R. & L.C.'s still not.*

*Fr.*

*See PM's note attached, which Tim is hanging onto until we get the Chief Secretary's comments  
23/7*



To: Mr Mount  
From: William Waldegrave

THE REORGANISATION OF LONDON UNIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF  
SOMERSET HOUSE

Under the compulsion of tough financial constraint, London University is on the verge of radical, and overdue, reorganisation. What the University has to do, and the way in which the Government has impelled it to put its house in order, is rather typical of what we have had to do to a number of our national institutions. London shows typical British strengths and weaknesses. The best research and teaching in the University is at least as good, and probably better, than anything else in the world. Against this has to be set a slow moving bureaucratic management system which has allowed too many sloppy practices to grow up and has drawn back in the past from the difficult and unpopular task of reorganising into centres of excellence the large number of small colleges and institutes with which history has landed the University.

Over the years, action has been recommended by Lord Todd, by Lord Annan, by Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer and others; but until we imposed a sharp squeeze (16% cut in real terms in 3 years) nothing happened. Now things are moving.

We have the great good luck that the new vice-chancellor, Randolph Quirk, is a man of courage and vision. He positively welcomes the fact that at long last the medical schools are being properly reorganised, and that college mergers are beginning to happen. He welcomes the impetus given to the search for non-Government money. He has some tough-minded supporters, such as Dahrendorf (who has made the LSE largely independent of recurrent Government grant), Brian Flowers, who has cut a lot of dead wood out of Imperial, and Neil Cameron of King's. They, and others, accept and support Quirk's vision of a London University with many of the smaller (and in some cases rather academically marginal) colleges merged



into a number of major centres of excellence. Valuable property could then be released and sold to buy new scientific and other equipment; overhead costs would be cut. Bedford has already voted to merge with Royal Holloway. Queen Elizabeth College will rejoin its original parent, King's. Chelsea should do the same. Westfield may become an overseas student's centre with an injection of private money.

Essential to the strategy is the alignment alongside University College (6,000 students) of a new major central college, absorbing the smaller colleges like Queen Elizabeth College and Chelsea and releasing some very valuable property. On the basis of excellence, and the strength of the leadership of Air Marshall Sir Neil Cameron, this should be King's. At present 3,500 strong, it should go up by about 2,000, making a trinity of great central colleges: Imperial, UCL, and King's, with Royal Holloway/Bedford in the west and QMC in the east. On this structure the post graduate institutes and the medical schools can be firmly and rationally based.

All these colleges are chartered bodies. All have councils and courts whose affection for their colleges can be reflected in blocking votes. It is perhaps a little like merging regiments: the sorrow of, say, Bedford's friends at its demise is something Conservatives can understand. If we could add a positive prize - provide a touch of vision in addition to the hard grind of retrenchment - it would both reward those who have not shirked the difficult job they have to do, and help us in terms of getting decisions moving quicker. The vision which Quirk and Cameron have, and with which I have been thoroughly infected, is that the remaining distinguished bureaucrats should be asked to leave Somerset House and that Quirk and Cameron be allowed to house their new King's in what would be one of the most splendid University precincts in any capital city.

The present King's site (which would of course be retained) adjoins Somerset House and is architecturally integrated with



it on the river side. Michael Heseltine and Paul Channon have just most imaginatively agreed to put the Courtauld Institute into the Gatehouse and North Facade of Somerset House where the von Seilern pictures and other splendid possessions of the Institute will be properly shown for the first time. The Courtauld is academically connected with King's: this is a first step which could now be transformed into a magnificent gesture by making the further large step.

King's is an absolutely first rate college which has never had adequate accommodation. It was launched by the Prime Minister of the day, the Duke of Wellington, who fought a duel on its behalf, (the only duel he ever fought) to disprove allegations that it was to be a papist front organisation. It was however an explicitly religious foundation. The Evening Standard in 1828 hoped that "with such a seminary in a prosperous position there will be neither motive nor excuse for any parent to inflict upon his offspring the disgrace of education in the infidel and godless college of Gower Street" (UCL, which was explicitly non-religious in its foundation). Much modified, of course, this religious link remains: Cameron's formidable number two, Professor Sutherland, is a theologian. Problems with the constriction of its Strand site have been perennial, and it has had to collect bits of other property. (It was once proposed to put it in Regent's Park, but a letter to the Times in 1828 argued that students in the park would present a greater danger to the residents than the occupants of the Zoo. The Editor agreed.) Somerset House is the obvious answer; and preliminary surveys show it to be extraordinarily easily adaptable to academic uses (file storage rooms for the library etc). The sale of other properties should cover by far the greater part of the cost of any necessary alterations.

If it were to be done, we would be able to point to splendid evidence that reorganisation is not all negative, that we value style as well as doggedness in retrenchment. Two



powerful Whitehall bureaucracies who retain offices (though much diminished from the old days) in Somerset House stand to lose, the Inland Revenue and the Lord Chancellor's Department. Doubtless there would be management problems for them in the move; perhaps there would be technical difficulty in spreading relocation costs across the right budgets. If I were a Commissioner of the Inland Revenue I would fight to maintain myself in offices far grander than the Prime Minister's. None of this is, actually, other than easily soluble if very senior Ministers were to give the system a kick. But it won't happen without that necessary encouragement.

*W.W.*

WILLIAM WALDEGRAVE

*20.7.82*