

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

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Sir Patrick Mayhew
Northern Ireland Office
Stormont Castle
Belfast BT4 3ST

Dear Sir Patrick,

Re: Northern Ireland Forum

Rules of Procedure Thank you for your letter of 24 July in response to our raising with you the exercise of your functions under paragraph 3(4) of Schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc.) Act 1996. We understand that you are currently considering the Forum's Rules of Procedure.

We raised with you at our meeting the fact that the Rules of Procedure did not have cross-community consensus and therefore that failed the independent test which you are bound to make every effort to apply i.e. "that the rules of procedure of the Forum facilitate the promotion of dialogue, understanding and consensus across the communities of Northern Ireland". As one piece of evidence in support of this we cited the inclusion of paragraph 7 of Rule 6 on flying the flag which had previously been voted down when the Forum had a more representative attendance.

Forum Committees We have a number of other concerns about the Forum which we wish to raise with you. The Forum has established four committees (parades, education, health and agriculture) with no input from a number of parties; some parties were not present, while others would not put forward views until the process was inclusive and until the Rules of Procedure had been approved.

The Women's Coalition is concerned about the composition of the Forum Committees and about the quorums which apply. These are heavily weighted towards one political section of the community. This is achieved by giving the larger parties four times the representation of the smaller parties on the "issue" committees. It is also achieved by setting the quorum at five members; which means that the four "issue" committees can be quorate with two parties in attendance and the Business Committee can be quorate with three parties. This can be achieved, and can only be achieved by one section of the community.

In reality the committees will be even more unrepresentative in that the SDLP will not take up their places and therefore a major section of the community will not be represented.

Chair of Forum The Women's Coalition continues to be unhappy about the situation with the chair of the Forum. Firstly it is the case that the current chairperson holds the position in a temporary capacity. The timescale and process by which a permanent chair is to be put in place is not clear. The management of this process within the Forum does not inspire confidence and indeed leaves many parties in the dark.

Secondly the Women's Coalition is unhappy about the performance of the chair and had made this clear by letter to the chair and in a meeting with the Forum Secretariat. The chair fails to control inappropriate behaviour from the floor of the Forum, bows to pressure from certain party leaders against decisions of the business committee and misleads the Forum with incorrect information and summing up. As an example of this the chair stated at the close of business on the 26th July that the Forum rules had been agreed unanimously when they clearly had not. One might be forgiven for thinking that the chair also gave the impression from this that those opposing the adoption of the rules of procedure at that meeting - the Women's Coalition and Labour - were of lesser importance than other parties in the room.

In Summary We met with you in July to express our view that you should not approve the Rule of Procedure. This continues to be our view. Our experience of the Forum has suggested that it is wounded indeed and that it cannot meet its terms of reference. In light of this, continued financial outlay on it in its present state must be questioned. Rather than proceed with Forum committees and Forum business as if all was well we believe the Forum should apply itself to finding ways in which it can renew itself for the purpose for which it was intended. The Women's Coalition is prepared to contribute to this and to make every effort to secure the kind of Forum in representativity, behaviour, business content and openness which we had hoped to be part of.

We would appreciate an urgent meeting with you to hear your views on the issues we have raised. In particular we wish to hear your considered response on the approval of the Rules of Procedure before the next meeting of the Forum which is due to take place on Friday, 6 September.

Yours sincerely,

Bronagh Hinds

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on behalf of N.I. Women's Coalition