

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 14 March 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.02 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: We have a slightly attenuated attendance today. Some people are in a less good place — Washington.

TALKS/FORUM

The Chairman: Last Friday I informed Members that the Secretary of State had yet to decide whether he regarded the talks as suspended and therefore, under the terms of the relevant Act, had to bring the Forum to an end. As you will know by now, on Monday he decided that the talks were indeed suspended and laid before both Houses of Parliament the necessary Order in respect of the Forum. If the Order is approved it is likely that it will come into effect next Friday — this day week — from which time the Forum will cease to exist.

However, I am sure that other Members are as pleased as I am that both Conservative and Labour have confirmed that the Forum will be reinstated after the general election — in other words, that we shall return, whichever party is in power. I am not including the Liberal Democrats. We are therefore entering an interruption in our activities — not an end to them. The practical implication of these developments is essentially that at the conclusion of today's business we propose to adjourn until Friday 30 May. This will therefore be a our last plenary meeting for some time, but Committees may continue to operate until the Order comes into effect.

10.05 am

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is extremely strange that the two major parties in Parliament should rush an Order in Council through. If both are committed to restoring the Forum, they did not need a suspension Order. It will be a bit hypocritical to abolish the Forum with the intention of bringing it back, in view of the fact that the talks have only been adjourned. What shenanigans. It is a grace-and-favour thing: "If you are good boys we will bring you back. If not, we won't." I want to put it on record that if the Forum is not restored my party will not be at any more talks.

The Chairman: I am very grateful for that.

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May I also put on record our appreciation to all the staff, not only those at your left and right, but all those in this building who look after us when we come here: the catering staff, those who are on security at the doors, those who are in the offices and not forgetting the members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary who guard us. To all of them we put on record our appreciation, and we look forward to 30 May, when we will be back.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum, rising today, will adjourn until 10.00 am on Friday, 30 May 1997.

The Chairman: I was almost tearful at some of the things you all said. I greatly appreciate it.

I hope you will agree that dialogue, as I have told the media, does not mean that people cannot express themselves with vehemence and with passion. There is nothing wrong with a body which has a pretty confrontational style — it is still dialogue. Provided that matters do not become personal, and you have heard me being pretty strong on that since my early days last June, we need not be at all ashamed of expressing ourselves with that kind of emphasis. I believe that we have made a good start. There is a great deal more that can be done and, in the words of another person who is not here but could be, "We have never gone away."

I wish you a very happy weekend, a very happy St Patrick's Day, a very happy Easter and a happy and successful 30 May, when I hope to see you all again.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.00 pm.