



SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

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4 June 1996

Dear David:

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

Your party having been successful in the recent elections is now entitled under the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Entry into Negotiations, Etc) Act 1996, to take its seats in the Northern Ireland Forum. I am writing to you now to set out the arrangements we propose to make for the Forum and to seek your views on them.

First Meeting

The Forum's first meeting is to be at a time determined by me. The Act specifies that this shall be after the commencement of negotiations but within four weeks from the date of the elections or as soon as possible after the expiry of that period. In determining this date I shall want to have regard to the possible duration of the plenary session of the negotiations, as well as the need not to delay unnecessarily the first meeting of the Forum. My present hope is to convene a first meeting of the Forum on 14 June.



Procedure

The Act requires me to notify interim rules of procedure to the Chairman. A draft of these is attached. Their purpose is to sustain the proceedings of the Forum until substantive rules are determined by its members and approved by me, as provided for in the Act.

These rules reflect the statutory purpose of the Forum to promote dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland, and it is my sincere hope that this objective will be shared and promoted by parties and members in the Forum, and expressed in its substantive rules of procedure. I shall, as required by the Act, in exercising my powers of approving substantive rules of procedure make every effort to secure that those rules facilitate the promotion of dialogue, understanding and consensus across the communities of Northern Ireland.

Interim Chairman

The Act also authorises me to nominate a member of the Forum to act as chairman until the Forum elects its own chairman. This person should, I suggest, command broad respect across parties in the Forum, so as to help it to conduct its initial business, as identified in the initial procedural rules, with authority, efficiency and decorum. I shall be glad to have your suggestions, on behalf of a party successful in the recent elections, as to a fit person or persons, to fulfil this task, irrespective of party affiliation.



Premises

For a variety of reasons, acquisition of accommodation for the Forum has not proved easy. Arrangements have however now been made for the Forum to meet in the Interpoint Centre, 20-24 York Street, Belfast initially in sufficient accommodation on the first floor. We are additionally arranging with the owners for the urgent refurbishment of a complete higher floor of the building which should be available in late July, to become the venue for the remainder of the Forum's duration.

Reporting of Proceedings

Arrangements are in hand to provide reporting facilities for early meetings. I shall naturally wish to consider the Forum's own views on this subject when it meets.

Staffing

I have provided the services of a small staff team, headed by Mr Nigel Carson, a member of the senior civil service in the Department of Finance and Personnel. He and his team have been engaged in planning for the Forum and expect to work closely with the interim chairman upon his nomination and thereafter.



Conclusion

I am anxious to hear your views on the matters concerned in this letter and to accommodate them wherever appropriate. Given the constraints of time, I shall be glad of a reply by Friday, 7 June.

James Fairman }
Admiral
