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NEW'S LETTER,

Seating wrangle disrupts Forum

THE second sitting of the Northern Ireland Forum was overshadowed by a row over who should sit where.

Members were forced to leave the Forum chamber within two minutes of the session starting yesterday morning after the SDLP complained that the Alliance Party was sitting in their seats.

Chairman John Gorman immediately adjourned the Forum and for an hour and half the seating issue was hammered out behind closed doors.

Alliance leader John Alderdice said if people expected his party to be a doormat they had another think coming. But when

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members returned the SDLP got their seats back.

The whole issue of seating arrangements, however, will be reviewed.

It was a stuttering start to an inconclusive day in which members debated the minutiae of the rules governing procedure in the Forum.

Issues such as how members should address each other and whether the Lord's Prayer should be said before the

session gets under way were all debated.

It was agreed in the end that the rules committee consider submissions from all parties before presenting a fresh draft of rules and regulations for debate at next week's Forum.

The parties agreed that John Gorman, caretaker chairman of the Northern Ireland forum, should stay in the job for at least another week.

Although the SDLP voiced reservations about delaying the selection of a full-time chairman at yesterday's session in Belfast's Interpoint Centre, delegates decided he should remain in place.

DUP leader Ian Paisley referred to Alliance's "musical chairs" behaviour and supported suggestions that the filling of the chairman's position be left to a meeting next week.

Brid Rodgers of the SDLP said it was not good enough to keep putting off the selection of a new chairman.

Former SDLP chairman Mark Durkan warned that serious difficulties would be created if they left the matter unresolved. It could "pollute" the work of the Forum, he added.

But the other parties decided the matter should be sorted out next week.

B/8.