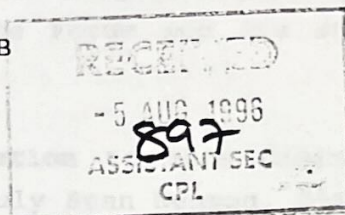


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19 - 7 AUG 1996

FROM: NIGEL CARSON
FORUM SECRETARY
DATE: 5 AUGUST 1996

CC: PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Hill - B
Dr Smyth - B



Mr Watkins - B

ALLIANCE PARTY : COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE FORUM

1. Thank you for letting me see the note from Peter Smyth to PS/Secretary of State of 26 July. As you know I was disappointed that the note was not copied to me directly despite the fact that a large element of it is critical of Forum Secretariat. I am glad to have the opportunity of setting the record straight.
2. Firstly, let me get it on the record that the Alliance Party have a legitimate complaint in relation to the last Business Committee meeting on Tuesday 23 July to which they did not receive a note confirming the meeting nor did they receive papers. It was an oversight on the part of Secretariat and I spoke to Sean Neeson personally afterwards and apologised. But let me be absolutely clear that that is the only meeting out of a total of 22 meetings since 14 June where this occurred. The complaints in paragraph 2 of Dr Smyth's note are therefore absolutely incorrect in seeking to present this exception as some kind of norm. In addition to say that decisions were being taken in meetings where a quorum was not present is a deliberate lie. During a discussion which I had with Sean Neeson before the meeting with the Secretary of State he asked me whether the Business Committee meeting on 23 July, which they had not been able to attend, had been quorate because they had heard a rumour that it had not been. I confirmed that it had been quorate. No decisions have been taken in any meetings where there has not been a full quorum

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present. To put such an accusation in front of the Secretary of State, knowing it to be untrue, is simply clutching at straws to find reasons to denigrate the Forum and its staff. It is reprehensible.

3. Let me make some other points in relation to this diatribe. Firstly, apart from the meeting on 23 July Sean Neeson, despite many opportunities to do so, has never made any complaint to me. Secondly, to compare levels of service to that which district councillors receive ignores the fairly obvious point that district councils tend to be smaller, the elected representatives are local and not spread across Northern Ireland and have had slightly more time than we have had to get good systems and processes up and running. I trust that someone at the meeting made this point in response to Mr Neeson.
4. Thirdly, before it recessed for August the Forum committees have been operating on a fairly ad hoc basis. At times meetings have been called with little notice. Procedurally it has been far from satisfactory and we have been trying to get the Business Committee to move to regular days at regular times and to plan its business much further ahead in order to avoid some of the complications which have arisen in the past. I would very happily have put the point to Sean Neeson that the fact that the Forum has achieved anything is largely due to the efforts which Secretariat have made to get things moving not, as might be concluded from this discussion, in spite of us.
5. Finally, as I said to you I met Robert Coulter (the UUP whip) and Sean Neeson together on 31 July (I would have met the DUP whip, Maurice Morrow at the same time but he had to cry off) and we had a useful discussion for an hour or so on practical issues which I was putting in front of them and which I want to get right. I should emphasise that that meeting was at my instigation; not Sean Neeson's nor Robert Coulter's. I should

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also record that no other party has voiced any criticism to me about any of the issues which the Alliance Party have raised.

- 6, I hope that this will put the Alliance complaints in some perspective. However I will be very happy to take stock of progress generally in the early Autumn.

[Signed NC]

NIGEL CARSON

CB 22803

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