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CENT SEC
17 SEPTEMBER 1996

cc PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) B
PS/PUS (B&L) B
PS/Sir David Fell B
Mr Thomas - o/r B
Mr Leach (B&L) B
Mr Watkins B
Mr Beeton B
Mr Carson
Mr Hill (B&L) B
Mr Maccabe B
Mr Stephens B
Mr Whysall (B&L) B
Mr Jagelman B

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

FORUM: MEETING WITH NI WOMEN'S COALITION

1. This is to let you have a report on the meeting which David Watkins and I had earlier today with representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. For purposes of this afternoon's meeting with the Forum Chairman, the Secretary of State may wish to be aware of the key points covered at the NIWC meeting.

Background

2. This morning's meeting was arranged in response to Ms Monica McWilliams' letter to the Secretary of State of 13 September. Although obstensibly about the outstanding Forum Rules of Procedure, the NIWC indicated that they wished to discuss more generally their position in relation to the Forum.

3. This was a useful and constructive meeting at which the NIWC representatives set out at some length their concerns regarding the Forum. A note of the meeting is annexed.

DL/LM/1200

Key Points

4. The following were the key points to emerge at the meeting:

(a) Flags -

The NIWC remain concerned at the Forum's attitude to the display of flags - they believe that the Forum Chairman is personally supportive of the proposal to display the Union flag at the Forum. They understand that at a recent Rules Committee meeting the Forum Chairman suggested that the individual party members should each bring a small Union flag into the Forum chamber to place in front of them at the table. They also understand that at a recent Business Committee meeting Mr Peter Robinson MP suggested that both the Ulster flag and the Union flag should be displayed in the Forum chamber.

(b) Forum title -

The NIWC regard the proposed title ("Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue") as inaccurate and inappropriate. They consider that the title should reflect the statutory purpose of the Forum (ie "a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland").

(c) Rule 13(1) -

The NIWC consider it is important that the Rules relating to decision-making at the Forum should 'facilitate the promotion of dialogue, understanding and consensus' [paragraph 3(4) of Schedule 2 to the Act]. They consider that draft Rule 13(1) should be adjusted to provide for the Forum Chairman to record his opinion that a matter is deemed to command cross-community support.

The NIWC would like draft Rule 13(1) to refer not only to the "main communities" of Northern Ireland but also the "various traditions" (ie a combination of the formula used in the initial rule of procedure and that substituted in the draft rule).

(d) Forum Chairman -

The NIWC are very critical of the performance of the Forum Chairman. They doubt his competence. They also suggest that he has acted from time to time in a partisan fashion. They consider he is too easily swayed by the stronger personalities within the Forum (eg Dr Paisley). The Chairman should be required to ensure that the Forum's Rules of Procedure are followed - instead the Chairman has allowed the Unionist parties to skew the membership of Forum Committees to the disadvantage of the smaller parties.

(e) Committees -

The NIWC consider it is wrong that the constitution of the Forum Committees is such that the Committees can be dominated by the main Unionist parties. They are also critical of the topics chosen as the basis for the four committees established to date (ie Parades, Agriculture, Education Administration Reform and Health). They consider that the Forum should be using its committee structure to examine more appropriate topics such as community relations.

(f) NIWC's future participation in Forum -

The NIWC are continuing to keep their participation in the Forum under review. They suggested that they will in part be influenced by the responses they receive to

the representations made at this meeting. They suggested that they may be prepared to stay in the Forum until it is formally reviewed in May 1997. However, they remain frustrated at the failure, as they see it, of the Forum to undertake the important work for which it was established. They would deprecate any attempt to link the Forum with the Talks process - eg there appears to be a suggestion that the Forum may wish to debate decommissioning and, possibly, establish a committee to consider decommissioning.

Conclusion

5. This was a constructive exchange and usefully allowed the NIWC representatives to sound-off (by proxy) at the Forum Chairman and, more generally, at the Forum itself. They clearly would like to play a constructive role within the Forum. They consider that the Forum as it is currently operating is failing to undertake the work for which it was established. They acknowledge, however, that the Forum is showing some signs of getting down to serious business (eg Friday's debate on the BSE crisis, and the work being undertaken to prepare submissions on the Education Administration Reform and on the Parades Review).

6. As I have previously suggested, the NIWC's frustrations in part reflect their lack of influence as one of the numerically least significant groupings within the Forum. Their representatives are all strong personalities and wish to see the Forum move in a particular direction which, to date, has not had the support of the majority of members currently attending the Forum. They also suffer from all too often being a target of criticism and opprobrium on the part of the other parties for what some of the other parties would see as their 'holier than thou' attitude.

7. However, there is some merit in most of the points made by the NIWC. Although it is still too soon to reach a considered

view on the Forum's ability to discharge its statutory remit, a considered view on this is likely to have to be reached by October/November with a view to determining whether the Forum should continue to operate until its formal statutory review date at the end of May next year.

[Signed DAL]

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SC 28196