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ANNEX

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION TO DISCUSS THE FORUM

Present:

Ms Monica McWilliams	D J Watkins
Ms Bronagh Hinds	D A Lavery
Ms Pearl Sagar	

Background

1. The meeting had been arranged in response to Ms McWilliams' letter to the Secretary of State dated 13 September requesting a meeting with the Secretary of State or with officials to discuss, inter alia, the NIWC's position in relation the Forum.

2. The meeting took place in the NIWC's leader's office in Castle Buildings. The meeting lasted approximately one and a half hours.

3. Ms McWilliams welcomed officials and indicated that there were a range of issues the NIWC wished to discuss, including the Forum Rules of Procedure.

Rules of Procedure

4. Ms McWilliams stressed that the Rules of Procedure submitted to the Secretary of State by the Forum had not been agreed unanimously by the Forum. For example, the rule relating to the display of the Union flag had not secured a 75% majority until the SDLP and Alliance had withdrawn from the Forum. Even then, that rule had been objected to by the NIWC and Labour. They considered that the Forum Chairman had consistently misrepresented the situation regarding approval of the rules.

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Flags

5. Ms McWilliams said she had been appalled to read that at a recent meeting of the Forum Rules Committee the Forum Chairman had suggested that the members of each party should bring a small Union flag into the Forum chamber to place on the table in front of them. She also referred to a report of a recent meeting of the Forum Business Committee at which Mr Peter Robinson MP had suggested that both the Ulster flag and the Union flag should be displayed in the Forum chamber on either side of the Chairman's table. Ms McWilliams suggested that the Forum Chairman was personally strongly in favour of the display of the Union flag in the Forum chamber - whereas she considered that a neutral stance would have been more appropriate on the part of the Chairman of such a body. The NIWC were concerned that it was being suggested that the landlord of the Interpoint Centre was content for the Union flag to be displayed at the Forum. In fact, they understood that the Forum Secretary had only consulted one of the two joint landlords concerned.

Forum Title

6. Ms McWilliams said that the NIWC considered the proposed alternative title for the Forum (ie "Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue") to be inaccurate and inappropriate. Section 3(1) of the Act provided for the Forum to be "a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland". The title of the Forum should reflect its statutory purpose.

Draft Rule 13(1)

7. Ms McWilliams referred to the absence of any mechanism in draft Rule 13(1) which would ensure that an affirmative decision of the Forum could be deemed to command support across the various traditions in Northern Ireland. The NIWC considered that the rule

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should be adjusted to follow the interim rule in providing for the Forum Chairman to record that, in his opinion, an affirmative decision would so command support. It was recognised that the Forum Chairman would not welcome this responsibility.

8. Draft rule 13(1) referred to an affirmative decision having to command support across "the various traditions" in Northern Ireland. The initial rule refers instead to commanding support across "the main communities". The NIWC now considered that it would be preferable to refer to both concepts and to provide for an affirmative decision to command support across "the main communities and the various traditions" in Northern Ireland.

**Forum Chairman**

9. The NIWC were very critical of the competence and evenhandedness of the Forum Chairman, Mr John Gorman. They questioned whether Mr Gorman was competent to properly chair the Forum.

10. The NIWC representatives were particularly critical of the Forum Chairman's apparent inability to correctly operate the Forum Rules of Procedure. They suggested that, for example, he was too easily swayed by the stronger personalities within the Forum. At recent debates, Dr Paisley had been allowed to make a number of interventions whereas the rules contemplated only one contribution per member. Similarly, Dr Paisley had recently been allowed to table an emergency motion regarding the flying of the Union flag even though the rules did not contemplate a motion being put to the Forum in this way.

11. The NIWC representatives also suggested that the Forum Chairman showed some signs of partiality and bias. He seemed to regard the NIWC as less-significant members of the Forum. He had recently suggested, inaccurately, that the Forum Rules of Procedure had been approved unanimously by the Forum. When it had

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been pointed out that the NIWC had opposed the adoption of the Rules, the Forum Chairman had indicated that the continued to regard this as a form of qualified unanimity.

12. Ms Hinds criticised the continuation in the Chair of an interim Chairman. It was pointed out, however, that the legislation does not impose any time limit on the period in office of an interim Chairman - in theory, the interim Chairman could remain in post throughout the life of the Forum. The NIWC representatives explained that they had sought, together with the DUP, to identify a suitable independent Chairman for the Forum. They had intended to nominate Rabbi Julia Neuberger. However, this initiative had not been followed-through.

13. The NIWC also criticised the Forum Chairman for unsatisfactory summing-up of debates. For example, he had recently congratulated the Forum on the standard of debate on boycotting, whereas in fact the debate had been of a very sectarian and unsatisfactory nature.

14. The NIWC criticised the Forum Chairman for failing to ensure that the Forum Rules of Procedure were followed. They wondered whether the Secretary of State had a duty to intervene (whether directly or through the Forum Secretary) to ensure that the Forum fulfilled its statutory remit and operated correctly.

15. The NIWC emphasised in particular the importance that the Forum Chairman should act in an impartial fashion, particularly in view of the fact that nationalist parties were absenting themselves from the Forum.

**Forum Committees**

16. The NIWC were critical of the topics on which the Forum had established committees (ie Parades, Agriculture, Education Administration Reform, and Health - they explained that the Forum had not established a Committee to examine boycotting, but had

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referred this subject to the Parades Committee for consideration). The NIWC considered that it would have been more appropriate to have established committees on topics such as community relations.

17. The NIWC had not nominated members to participate in the Forum Committees (other than the Rules Committee and the Business Committee). They had decided to hold-back until the Secretary of State had approved the Forum Rules.

18. They considered that the Forum should seek to initiate wider community consultation.

NIWC participation in the Forum

19. Ms McWilliams explained that the NIWC's continued participation in the Forum was being kept under review. They would like to participate in the Forum and would like to see the Forum play a constructive role of the type envisaged in the legislation. She suggested that the NIWC may stay in the Forum until its formal statutory review in May 1997.

20. It was suggested that the NIWC's attitude to the Forum might be influenced in part by the response they received to the discussions with officials.

21. It was explained to the NIWC that the Secretary of State would be meeting the Forum Chairman later that day. The Secretary of State would wish to reflect on the various matters on which he had received representations. The Secretary of State would be particularly concerned to ensure that the Forum fulfilled its statutory task. However, the "levers" which were available to him to influence this were relatively limited under the legislation. The Secretary of State had a statutory power to bring the Forum to an end before May 1997, however this would not be a decision that would be taken lightly.

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Link between the Forum and Talks

22. Ms McWilliams said that there were some indications that the Forum may wish to debate decommissioning. It had also been suggested that the Forum might establish a committee to consider decommissioning. The NIWC representatives suggested that this illustrated a desire to create linkage between the Forum and the All-Party Negotiations. This would not be appropriate as the two areas were quite separate and distinct.

Use of Forum Offices

23. At the end of the meeting, Ms McWilliams raised the possibility of the NIWC members making use of their allocated office space at the Forum on non-meeting days. They had in mind using their office to hold meetings with outside individuals and organisations to discuss matters relevant to the work of the Forum. It was suggested that the NIWC should raise this matter with the Forum Secretary in the first instance. Provided the work being undertaken was relevant to the NIWC's participation in the Forum then, at first blush, it did not seem that there would be any particular difficulty in making use of their allocated offices on weekdays other than those on which the Forum or its committees were sitting.

Conclusion

24. The NIWC representatives thanked officials for attending the meeting to discuss these matters. Officials undertook to report back to the Secretary of State on the substance of the meeting.

[Signed: DAL]

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SC 28196

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