

RECEIVED 15 MAY 1997
NC/32/5

FROM: MRS L ROGERS
CPL DIVISION
14 MAY 1997

DESK IMMEDIATE

cc PS/Mr Murphy (B&L) - O
PS/Lord Dubs (DANI&L) - O
PS/PUS (B&L) - O
PS/Sir David Fell - O
Mr Steele - O
Mr Thomas - O
Ms Wheldon, HOLAB
Mr Watkins - O
Mr Wood (B&L) - O
Mr Beeton - O
Mr Brooker - O
Mr Carson - O
Mr Hill - O
Mr Lavery - O
Mr Maccabe - O
Mr Whysall - O
Mrs McNally - O
Ms Benson - O
Ms Healy - O
Mr Warner - O
HMA, Dublin
Mr Lamont, RID
Mr Cornish - O

1. Mrs S Evans, HOLAB, QAG (to attach the draft Order)
2. PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

REACTIVATING THE FORUM

1. This submission seeks approval to lay before Parliament a draft Order which will have the effect of bringing Section 3 (the Forum) of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 into force again on 3 June so as to reactivate the Forum.
2. This Order is essential so as to fulfil the Government's undertaking to reactivate the Northern Ireland Forum in time for the reconvening of the multi-party political negotiations in Northern Ireland on 3 June.

Background

3. The Northern Ireland Forum was established under Section 3 of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996. It met regularly in Belfast from June last year until this March, when it was suspended by the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Cessation of Section 3) Order 1997 [SI 1997 No 1046].
4. The suspension of the Forum was a statutory requirement as the multi-party negotiations had been suspended until after the General Election and the Northern Ireland local government elections.
5. The effect of the draft Order will be to reinstate the Forum from 3 June until the end of May 1998.

Timing

6. During the debate on the Forum's suspension, both the then Government and Opposition gave undertakings that the Forum would be reinstated early in the life of the new Parliament.
7. Dr Paisley (DUP) has indicated that his party will not attend the multi-party negotiations until the Forum has been reinstated and has held its first meeting. David Trimble (UUP) has made clear that if the Government were not to revive the Forum, he would not participate in talks, though without such clear stipulations about dates. A senior member of his party has written to the Secretary of State indicating that the UUP will not return to the multi-party negotiations unless the Forum has held its first meeting on 30 May (i.e. the date to which the Forum had adjourned prior to its suspension); but UUP headquarters have suggested to PAB that this should not be taken as the strict party line.) The UUP are likely to be content so long as the Forum is clearly going to be revived and to be able to meet within a short period of talks recommencing.

Parliamentary Procedure

8. The Order to reinstate the Forum is required to be laid in draft and approved by resolution of both Houses of Parliament. Ordinarily, the draft Order would first require to be considered by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments (JCSI).
9. However, in view of the imminent Whitsun recess and the likelihood that the JCSI will not be reconstituted until after 3 June (i.e. the date when the multi-party negotiations recommence), the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has indicated that it is essential that the Order should be considered by both Houses as a matter of urgency without having first been scrutinised by the Joint Committee. In order to achieve this, arrangements have been set in hand at official level with the Chief Whips Office to seek exemption for the Order from scrutiny by the JCSI under Standing Order 70(1)(A).
10. We are discussing dates for debate with the Whips, and shall offer further advice shortly.
11. In order to ensure that the Forum is in place in time for the resumption of the Talks, it will be necessary to lay the attached draft Order on Thursday of this week and to have the Order debated in both Houses by 2 June.
12. The attached draft Press Release at Annex A would be issued to coincide with the laying of the draft Order.
13. I am also enclosing draft letters at Annex B for the Secretary of State to send to the Forum Chairman and to the leaders of the parties (other than Sinn Fein) who are entitled to attend the Forum. These letters should issue to coincide with the laying of the draft Order.
14. The draft letter to John Hume includes an optional paragraph indicating that the Secretary of State would like to see the SDLP return to the Forum. This may not have much effect, but it probably should be included for appearance's sake.
15. We shall put forward briefing material for the debate, including a draft speech, nearer the time.

Conclusion

16. If the Secretary of State is content I should be grateful if the approved Order could be **returned to me**. (I will then arrange for it to be sent to HOLAB for laying.)

signed Linda Rogers

**LINDA ROGERS
Constitutional and Political Division
11 Millbank
Ext 6575**

DRAFT PRESS RELEASE

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland today laid before Parliament a draft of an Order to reinstate the Northern Ireland Forum from Tuesday 3 June 1997.

The Secretary of State said:

“I am glad to start the process of reviving the Forum. There is a great deal it could usefully do in the field of promoting dialogue and understanding in support of political progress in Northern Ireland. I hope it will focus on such opportunities.

We shall do all we can to have the draft Order approved quickly by both Houses of Parliament, despite the pressures on their time at present, so that there is no unnecessary delay in the Forum meeting.”

The draft Order needs to be approved by both Houses of Parliament, before it is made by the Secretary of State. Because of the Queen’s Speech debate, Parliamentary time is very short at present, but it is hoped to have debates before, or just after, the Whitsun recess.

NOTE FOR EDITORS

The Forum was established under Section 3 of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996. It is open to all 110 delegates returned at the election of 30 May 1996 in Northern Ireland, from amongst whom parties also selected participants to attend the multi-party Talks. Sinn Fein were entitled to attend the Forum (unlike the Talks, to which they can only be admitted after an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire), but have never done so. The SDLP initially participated, but withdrew after the civil disturbances of last Summer.

The Forum was suspended on 22 March 1997 on account of the suspension of the Talks during the period of the General election and the Northern Ireland local government elections.

Its remit is to discuss issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland. The Act makes clear that it is a deliberative body only, without legislative, executive or administrative functions.

The draft Order is formally entitled the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Revival of Section 3) Order 1997. It will have the effect of bringing Section 3 (the Forum) of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 into force again on 3 June 1997 and until the end of May 1998.

DRAFT LETTER FOR SIGNATURE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

**J Gorman Esq CVO, CBE, MC, DL
Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue
3rd Floor
Interpoint Centre
20-24 York Street
BELFAST
BT15 1AQ**

May 1997

I am writing to let you know that I have today arranged for a draft Order to be laid before Parliament which will have the effect of reinstating the Forum from Tuesday 3 June, the date on which the multi-party Talks reopen.

As you know, my predecessor was obliged to suspend the Forum due to the suspension of the Talks. At that time, I gave an undertaking that a Labour Government would introduce the necessary Order to give the Forum a second year of life. The draft Order which has been laid would honour this commitment.

I look forward to following the proceedings of the Forum in the coming weeks and hope that it will be able to make a worthwhile contribution through the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland.

Like my predecessor, I am very grateful to you for the work you have undertaken to do as Chairman of the Forum. I hope that we shall have an opportunity to meet soon to discuss your work.

cc Mr Thomas - O
Mr Watkins - O
Mr Bell - O
Mr Stephens - O
Mr Wood (B&L) - O
Mr Beeton - O
Mr Brooker - O
Mr Lavery - O
Mr Carson - O
Mr Hill - O
Mr Maccabe - O
Mrs Rogers - O
Mr Whysall - O
Mrs Evans, HOLAB

DRAFT LETTER FOR SIGNATURE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

[Address list attached]

May 1997

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[For inclusion in the letter to John Hume only: I am very much aware of the feelings that led SDLP members to conclude they had to withdraw from the Forum following the events of last Summer. But I hope that it might be possible for your party to reconsider its attitude to the Forum now that we have the opportunity to make a fresh start in our pursuit of political agreement in Northern Ireland. I know that the SDLP would have an important contribution to make to the work of the Forum and that it would be much stronger for your participation.]

cc Mr Thomas - O
Mr Watkins - O
Mr Bell - O
Mr Stephens - O
Mr Wood (B&L) - O
Mr Beeton - O
Mr Brooker - O
Mr Lavery - O
Mr Carson - O
Mr Hill - O
Mr Maccabe - O
Mrs Rogers - O
Mr Whysall - O
Mrs Evans, HOLAB

Party Leaders Address list

Mr David Trimble MP
Ulster Unionist Party
3 Glengall Street
BELFAST
BT2 5AE

Mr John Hume MP MEP
Social Democratic and Labour Party
Cranmore House
611c Lisburn Road
BELFAST
BT9 7YT

The Rev Dr I R K Paisley MP MEP
Ulster Democratic Unionist Party
91 Dundela Avenue
BELFAST
BT4 3BU

R McCartney QC MP
UK Unionist Party
10A Hamilton Road
BANGOR
Co Down
BT20 4LE

Lord Alderdice
Alliance Party of NI
88 University Street
BELFAST
BT7 1HE

Alderman Hugh Smyth
Progressive Unionist Party
182 Shankill Road
BELFAST
BT13 2BH

Councillor Gary McMichael
Ulster Democratic Party
12A Bridge Street
LISBURN
Co Antrim
BT28 1XY

Ms Monica McWilliams
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
Downtown Women's Building
30 Donegall Street
BELFAST
BT1 2GQ

Cllr Malachi Curran
84-86 Main Street
Killough
DOWNPATRICK
Co. Down
BT30 7QD