



SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

Ms Bronagh Hinds
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
Block B
Castle Buildings

R. 9/9/96
NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ
M.C.
file

4 September 1996

Ms Bronagh Hinds (i) / Mrs -

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM

Thank you for your letter of 3 September concerning the Northern Ireland Forum.

We had an initial opportunity to cover some of this ground when we met on 22 July. Since then, I have reflected carefully on the matters discussed at our meeting.

You will wish to know that earlier this week I wrote to the Forum Chairman indicating that it was not possible for me to approve the draft rules of procedure in their current form and requesting that two of the rules (draft rule A(1) and draft rule 13(1)) be reconsidered. I also requested that draft rule 6(7) be deleted.

As I indicated in my letter to the Chairman, I consider it is important that the Forum should be able to operate under its own rules of procedure as soon as practicable and I very much hope that once the rules have been reconsidered and returned to me that it will be possible for me to grant them my approval. In doing so I am very conscious, as I told you at our meeting, of the statutory duty imposed on me by virtue of paragraph 3(4) of Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996. However, it



is my opinion that the voluntary absence from the Forum of the SDLP members does not, in itself, preclude the approval of the rules under that provision.

You have also raised some matters relating to the day-to-day operation of the Forum, including the composition and quorum of some of the Forum committees and the performance of the Forum Chairman. I must say that I currently take the view that many of these matters are for the Forum itself to resolve. There are, I imagine, conflicting views on many of them. There is, however, no uncertainty regarding the status of the Forum Chairman. Paragraph 1(2) of Schedule 2 to the 1996 Act provides that the initial Chairman nominated by me is to be the Chairman of the Forum until such time as the Forum itself holds an election for the post of Chairman.

You have also raised some concerns regarding the ability of the Forum to meet what you describe as its "terms of reference". The Forum is, of course, established under section 3(1) of the 1996 Act to be a Forum for the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland. I consider that it would be premature at this early stage in the life of the Forum to try to arrive at any final and considered view as to the ability of the Forum to discharge this statutory remit. This is, however, a matter which I would wish to continue to keep under review, and it is a matter on which I am sure that Michael Ancram would be pleased to hear your views.

James Spence
SA 6/2/96