

Alliance

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

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→ Forum.

27 October, 1995

Embargo 11.59am

A statement by Alliance Party Leader Dr John Alderdice.

The Downing St. Declaration was a watershed document which has established the principles upon which a settlement of our historic problems will be based. The Document established the basis for the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and at an early stage, I made clear the preparedness of the Alliance Party to play a full and active role in the Forum.

For the past year, I and my colleagues have spared no effort of time or commitment to make the Forum work and I believe that it has had some success, not least in assisting politicians here in the Republic to view more realistically the issues which will have to be addressed in substantive talks with Unionists if we are to reach a settlement. Unfortunately, it seems to us that despite our best efforts, the Forum has been running out of steam in recent times and it is not hard to see why this is so.

The Forum was established to address the Northern Ireland problem but aside from Seamus Mallon, the most senior figures in the SDLP and Sinn Fein have not found it sufficiently

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important to attend most of the Forum sessions. The long suffering tax payers of the Republic who are footing a fairly sizable bill would, I suspect, be surprised and disappointed that leaders like John Hume and Gerry Adams are available for all sorts of meetings, demanding urgent talks with the Taoiseach and calling incessantly for All-Party talks and yet are largely unavailable for the talks which are actually going on. This in itself is bad enough, but there is more. Those of us who do attend, have worked on with their understudies trying to reach tentative agreements only to find the more senior players pulling the mat from the discussions and rendering them nugatory. This is no more satisfactory now, than when it happened in previous talks.

We believe that the Forum has a useful function but only if everyone plays their part. The Irish government and other parties have put a great deal into the whole peace process but the Forum will simply wither away unless it begins to get the attention it deserves from Northern nationalist leaders.

I confess that it is hard to understand why the Forum does not hold their interest. Are they seduced by other attractions or is it that the questions being raised by the Forum, questions like the principle of consent, are just too difficult to face head-on? If so, they will be even more difficult when we reach substantive talks.

This leads me to the question of how the desirable end which is All Party talks can be achieved. It certainly is not easy to get excited about entering another 4/5 years of talks about talks. That is one reason why we are looking at an elected constitutional convention. This convention would be time-limited, it would have to include everyone and it would have to address all relationships

including of course, the North-South relationship. It is twenty years since Unionists, Nationalists and Alliance were together in an elected negotiating context. All non-elected talks since then have failed. We have all agreed that the people should decide on the outcome of talks, but why should the people not also decide who should conduct the talks on their behalf. Far better that the people should decide, than that the decisions be left to Party Leaders dispensing place and patronage like chieftains of the clans. But there is one further experience that has forced me to adopt such a proposal. It is the experience of the Forum.

It seems that the only way to ensure that the principal players actually turn up and work the process rather than trying to twist arms in back corridors everywhere from here to Washington, is to require all of us to submit ourselves to the people and accept the discipline of conscientious attendance thereafter.

For the last year, I have cancelled and rearranged my diary, refused invitations and changed plans frequently in order to play my part in the Forum whilst others have not. For the next few weeks, I have decided not to keep turning down such requests and so I will not be at the Forum. But, if others are prepared to recommit themselves to the work of this excellent body, they will not find my commitment wanting and they will also persuade me and others that their calls for All-Party talks are truly genuine.

Ends

The Party Press Officer may be contacted on 0468 151972.