

Figuring out the Forum

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The proposed numbers of seats per party for the Dublin Forum are somewhat strange. The Irish Government's statement that two seats is "the correct balance for the Alliance Party" simply does not hold water when we examine the number of seats allocated to other parties. There are a number of other anomalies which we should be aware of as well if it comes to direct negotiations.

The original basis of the forum was understood to be 25 seats for representatives of Northern parties and 25 for parties from the Republic. This immediately raises the interesting question of whether SF are to be regarded as a Northern or a Southern party (the same goes for Democratic Left, of course). SF's votes in the South however are deeply insignificant; 3% in the European elections in June 1994, and 1.6% in the 1992 General election. We may confidently assert that SF's support in the Republic is far too small to entitle them to an extra seat on that basis.

I would like to know which Independents are going to be eligible to fill the seat marked for them at the Forum as well, and how they will choose between them who gets it. Do Independents for this purpose include Pat Cox? Maybe we should be told.

The seats for Southern parties have clearly been allocated in order to give the Government parties a 14-11 majority, and to very roughly reflect the pecking order of the other parties as follows:

Party	seats provisionally allocated at forum	seats on basis of 1992 votes	seats on basis of 1994 votes
Fianna Fáil	9	12	10
Fine Gael	6	7	7
Labour	5	6	3
Prog Dems	2	1	2
Green Party	1	0	2
Democratic Left	1	0	1
Independents	1	-	-

The seats for Northern parties have been allocated in a very bizarre manner indeed. We have not been told how many are being kept vacant until that happy day when the UUP, DUP and Sir James Kilfedder graciously accept their invitations, but it would look to be 15 since 10 are accounted for; 5 for the SDLP, 3 for Sinn Féin, and a mere two for the only party attending the Forum with a significant Protestant membership. The figures look like this:

Party	seats provisionally allocated at forum	seats on basis of 1992 votes	seats on basis of 1993 votes	seats on basis of 1994 votes
UUP	?	10	9	6
DUP	?	3	5	8
Tories	?	1	0	0
SDLP	5	7	6	8
Sinn Féin	3	2	3	2
Alliance	2	2	2	1

The principle of larger parties giving up seats for the smaller ones to be represented seems to have been applied in a rather odd way: the SDLP are subsidising the Unionists and Sinn Féin, but for some reason not us. Obviously they have unselfishly chosen to sacrifice up to three of the seats to which they might have been entitled in order to over-represent the absent Unionists. Perhaps giving extra seats to those who won't be there saves the Irish taxpayer's money?

Nicholas Whyte, 18 October 1994