



Oifig an Taoisigh  
Office of the Taoiseach

26 November, 1997

Lord Alderdice  
Leader The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland  
86 University Street  
Belfast BT7 1HE

**Reconvening of Forum for Peace and Reconciliation**

Dear John,

You may be aware that in my speech to the Solidarity to Organise Peace Group in Dublin on 24 July last, I said, inter alia:

"I am also prepared to consider the possibility of reconvening the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation on an occasional basis, depending on the wishes of other parties."

The intention to convene occasional meetings of the Forum was confirmed in a number of replies to Parliamentary Questions in the House from 30 September and most recently on 18 November. This reflected inter alia, the fact that a number of the parties participating in the Forum had, in the interval, formally requested, in the House and otherwise, that the Forum be reconvened. The parties in question were the Alliance Party, Sinn Féin, the Green Party and the Labour Party. The issue was also raised in bilateral meetings I had with a range of parties operating in Northern Ireland, in telephone consultations which the Secretary-General of the Forum conducted, at my request, with the Co-ordinators of the various delegations participating in the Forum and in the wings of the talks process with further Northern Ireland parties that have achieved representation in those talks since meetings of the Forum were suspended.

The consultations with Delegation Co-ordinators covered the issue of whether invitations should be issued to these additional Northern Ireland parties to



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participate in the Forum. Soundings were also taken with representatives of those parties as to whether they would wish to respond positively, if invited. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and the Labour group responded in the affirmative. The Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party indicated that they would place the question before their Party Executives but it was subsequently confirmed that they would not envisage taking up membership of the Forum. Delegation co-ordinators were generally favourable to issuing invitations to these additional parties that wish to participate and no objection was raised.

The reactions of Delegation Co-ordinators in regard to reconvening the Forum were, as to the great majority, favourable although some doubts were expressed. The consultations also covered the possible agenda and there was little or no objection to the proposal put forward that, for a first meeting of the reconvened Forum, it was appropriate that the main item for discussion would, as I indicated in the Dáil on 18 November, be a general review of the political situation and of political developments in regard to Northern Ireland.

Against the above background, I have asked the Chairperson of the Forum, Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness and the Secretary-General, Mr Walter Kirwan to convene a public plenary meeting of the Forum in the Conference Centre, Dublin Castle, at 10.30 am on Friday, 5 December, 1997, to continue until 1 pm and to be followed by lunch. I have proposed to the Chairperson that the main item for the agenda might be statements from delegations on "Northern Ireland: Political Situation and Developments" and that, in line with what I said in the Dáil on 18 November, following those statements, time might be allowed for delegations not participating in the multi-party talks in Belfast to put questions to delegations that are participating in a framework that would ensure equitable treatment of all delegations. I have told the Chairperson that, in line with the practice when the Forum was originally established, I am issuing invitations to the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and to the Labour Group in Northern Ireland to each nominate one full member and one alternate member to the Forum, with the same facility for substitute members as other delegations.



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Following the sad loss of Senator Gordon Wilson, I am also inviting Senator Maurice Hayes to take up the individual seat in the Forum which the late Senator Wilson filled with such distinction.

I envisage that the Forum will convene essentially on the same basis as before its meetings were suspended. The Chairperson and Secretary-General will be as before and the same membership, procedural, financial, media and seating arrangements will apply, subject to the necessary adjustments to accommodate the new delegations.

The Government consider that in relation to Northern Ireland, the multi-party negotiations must remain the primary arena and focus. We also recognise the very considerable demands that these negotiations place on all those participating in them. Against that background, it is envisaged that meetings of the Forum should be convened only at occasional intervals, say every two or three months. For that reason, it is not intended to re-establish a secretariat exclusively devoted to servicing the Forum. The Secretary-General will, however, remain at the disposal of Delegation Co-ordinators, Secretaries and Members to co-ordinate arrangements to the extent necessary. Adequate Secretariat arrangements will be made on an ad hoc basis for the meeting on 5 December and for other meetings as necessary.

It is not intended that delegations will be reallocated offices in Dublin Castle on a continuing basis but it is intended on 5 December and otherwise, as necessary, to arrange for telephones to be available for use by Forum members, as well as some rooms in which bilateral meetings could be held, if desired, in the wings of or following the Forum meeting.

The issue has been raised as to whether a meeting of the Forum's Co-ordinating Committee should be held in advance of the Forum meeting, in regard to the agenda. In the course of the consultations undertaken, there were divided views on this matter. Having regard to my proposal, set out above, as to the agenda for the meeting on 5 December, I suggest that it is not necessary to hold a meeting of the Co-ordinating Committee before it but, of course, I would see



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no objection to any meeting thereafter to consider agendae and business for any further meetings of the Forum.

I should say that in regard to the meeting on 5 December, advance soundings were taken with Northern Ireland parties participating in the Forum in Belfast which generally meets on Fridays. Those parties consulted indicated that they saw no objection to meetings of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation on Fridays, that they could make the necessary dispositions and that they would prefer meetings to be on Fridays. If any change emerges in this position, we can consider how best to react.

I am enclosing a list of your party's nominated full, alternate and substitute members of the Forum. It may be that with the lapse of time, your party may wish to review these nominations. Any changes should be notified to the Secretary-General of the Forum, Mr Walter Kirwan (Tel Nos 6624 888 or 619 4093) as soon as possible. He will also be ready to respond to any other queries as to the forthcoming Forum meeting.

Yours sincerely

Bertie Ahern  
Taoiseach