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Meeting between Taoiseach and Tánaiste and Leaders of Fine Gael, 29.11.94

the Progressive Democrats and Democratic Left

about Forum for Peace and Reconciliation,

at the Office of the Taoiseach, Government Buildings,

on Tuesday, 18 October, 1994

1. Accompanied by the Tánaiste and the undersigned, the Taoiseach met the leaders of the three parties together on Tuesday, 18 October, 1994 at 7.00p.m. to discuss the proposed Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. The Taoiseach explained that his earlier reluctance to hold a joint meeting, as distinct from separate meetings with each of the three party leaders, had stemmed from a concern that a joint meeting could be perceived by other parties, in the North as Southern parties getting together to pre-arrange matters among themselves. Mr. Bruton said that the Opposition parties had not wanted to make a public issue out of this matter but had believed that in practice, a joint meeting would serve to get business done more quickly.

2. Mr. Bruton then referred to the document previously supplied setting out the joint position of the three parties on the Forum (copy attached). He referred to the suggested addition to the draft Terms of Reference of the Forum:

The Taoiseach said that as the Forum was not a negotiating body, the possibility of such negotiation did not arise. Mr. Bruton said that they had read the Sinn Féin paper on the Forum which had been sent to them. It involved fundamentals. Fine Gael did not wish to waste time debating fundamentals. They were not suggesting that all parties must accept the Downing St. Declaration in order to participate in the Forum. Their proposal was a reasonable attempt to address the issues arising from the Sinn Féin paper.

3. The Taoiseach responded that logically, there could be no negotiation of the Declaration, involving the forum. There were only two parties to the Declaration, the Irish and British Governments. Deputy de Rossa said that the party leaders understood that. They also understood that the forum was a way to bring Sinn Féin into the democratic political process. But they do not wish to have to defend, daily in the Forum, the Downing St. Declaration accepted by all other parties in the State. The Taoiseach reiterated that as the Forum had a purely consultative role, the proposed addition to the Terms of Reference was unnecessary.

4. Deputy Harney referred to the risk of isolation of Sinn Féin, affecting their possible role in a renewed Talks process. It appears that the latter may run side by side with the Forum. The Taoiseach said that he was not so sure about this. He had the impression, just recently, that the British were dragging their feet. The Tánaiste commented that the next two weeks would tell the difference. He felt concern about matters. As compared with the excellent principles of the Downing Street Declaration, the British appear to find it hard to put flesh on the bones.

5. Deputy Harney said that it appeared from the papers and utterances coming from Sinn Féin that they believed they could go into the Forum and get support for a change to the principle of consent. The Taoiseach responded that he and the Government had made clear from the outset that consent was basic. Deputy de Rossa commented that Sinn Féin have been willingly led into the process but it was clear that their interpretation was different as to the need for consent. It would lead to waste of much time to allow any such absence of clarity to subsist. The Tánaiste replied that negotiation was a function of the Government, not the Forum. At the latter, all parties participating would have to listen to a lot of rubbish from Sinn Féin.
6. Deputy Harney wondered if Sinn Féin clearly saw they were not getting what they wanted, where would everybody be going with the Forum process. How did the Government see the likely duration of the Forum? The Taoiseach replied that it would be necessary to see how matters proceeded as regards Talks, whether there would be bilateral or roundtable etc. For these reasons, it seemed best to leave it to the Forum itself to decide when its useful term has been completed.
7. Deputy Bruton asked about the level of membership of the Forum. Would representatives be drawn from backbenchers? He would question the value of his participation if the Government were not represented at a high level. The Taoiseach responded: "we'll be there". The Tánaiste said "we will have to lead our delegations". The Opposition leaders were visibly relieved and very satisfied to hear these remarks and Deputy Bruton said that their import was "very important".
8. Reverting to the proposed addition to the terms of reference, Deputy Bruton reiterated that the Opposition leaders thought it would be beneficial. The Taoiseach said he was not convinced as to the need for it. The Tánaiste said that a formula of words related to the proposal could be included in speeches to be made at the inaugural session of the Forum, whether by the Taoiseach or the Chairperson, in order to get this matter of the agenda. The Taoiseach said it could be made clear by the Chairperson. This appeared to be acceptable to the Opposition leaders.
9. Deputy Bruton, referring to the next proposal in the Opposition paper said they wanted numbers of seats for all parties, including the Unionists, announced from the outset. They were not naive enough to think that the OUP or the DUP would come soon to the Forum but such an announcement could encourage them to come later. This should not be a big issue. The Taoiseach recalled that Dr. Paisley had said he would not be responding at all to the invitation sent to him, while Mr. Molyneaux had said "no". In the circumstances, an announcement of an allocation of seats would be seen by them as an impertinence. Deputy Harney commented that it would demonstrate the recognition of the prospective participants in the Forum that it was incomplete without Unionist representation. Deputy Bruton said

that if the Government did not wish to get in to the business of breaking down the numbers of seats available to each Unionist party, they could leave a block of seats open for all the Unionists. The Taoiseach that it would suffice simply to make clear that if the Unionists changed their minds, they would be allocated seats on a generous basis. Deputy Bruton said that when he had seen the numbers of members for each participating party set out on the TV screen, with no number of seats for Unionists, he felt sick. The Tánaiste said that it might be different if one knew that the Unionists would not simply damn the gesture. Deputy Bruton asked that the Opposition be let sound out the possible Unionist reaction. This was agreed by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste.

10. On the representation of the Alliance Party, the Tánaiste said there had apparently been a "crossing of wires". When the Alliance chairman, Mr. McGarry, was interviewed on the media, he had been unaware of the proposals as regards alternate members. On the "6. 01" TV programme earlier that evening, Mr. Alderdice had been much more conciliatory. Deputy de Rossa said that it would be a mistake to let this matter continue unresolved up to Friday (when the Government were to meet the Alliance Party). The Alliance Party saw participation in the Forum as coming into the lion's den. Against that background, it was disastrous for them to be perceived as having less respect than Sinn Féin, in terms of the relative numbers of full members. The media did not put a lot of weight on numbers of alternate members. The Taoiseach said that it would be necessary to discuss the matter with other parties. The SDLP might have views. He referred again to Dr. Alderdice's conciliatory tone on TV earlier. Deputy Bruton cautioned against being misled by this. He had discussed the matter with Alderdice who was very strong about it. The Taoiseach said that in allocating seats, it had been necessary to have some objective basis of reference. Deputy de Rossa noted that in terms of political representation in Northern Ireland, Alliance are very close to Sinn Féin. But there were wider political considerations that must also be given due weight. The Taoiseach said that on votes obtained, Sinn Féin were well ahead of Alliance. Deputy Bruton, supporting the need to consider wider political aspects, said that Alliance draw some of their support from the unionist community. The Taoiseach said that he did not believe that Alliance would pull out of the Forum, to which Deputy Bruton replied that he knew Dr. Alderdice had been biting his lip on TV. Deputy de Rossa said that there were a great many people in Northern Ireland, outside supporters of the SDLP or of Sinn Féin, watching to see how we treated the Alliance Party. The Taoiseach concluding on this point, said that he heard and noted the case being made but could not guarantee any change until he had completed the consultations.

11. Referring to the request for an extra full member for Democratic Left and an extra alternate each for the PDs and Fine Gael, the Taoiseach expressed anxiety that such changes could have a domino effect. Deputy Bruton drew attention to the fact that only one extra full member was at issue. The Taoiseach asked "why not concede that on the basis that all other parties would stay unchanged?". Deputy Bruton said that he would not press for the extra alternate sought for Fine Gael. Deputy Harney said that she would have to insist. Deputy de Rossa held that it was not tenable to give only 1 full member to Democratic Left, while Sinn Féin got 3. The Taoiseach concluded that he would see whether it would be possible to give 2 full members and 1 alternate to Democratic Left and 2 full members and 2 alternates to the PDs.
12. As regards Independents, the question was raised as to whether this related only to independent members of the Dáil and Seanad. Deputy Bruton suggested leaving some more seats for independents, to allow some from Northern Ireland to be added.
13. The Taoiseach said that the Government side saw no problem in having representatives of victims of violence called to give presentations before the Forum. The Opposition parties should, however, realise that Sinn Féin would have no difficulty in producing lots of victims on their side.
14. The Taoiseach referred to the Opposition proposal that the Forum establish a formal link with the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland. If this were done, there would be no incentive for Unionists to participate directly in the Forum proper. Deputy Bruton did not accept that the absence of the link they suggested would give any incentive. Establishment of such a link would help the Unionists to see the Forum as less threatening. The Select Committee was now pursuing an economic agenda. This was the area on which John Hume wanted the forum to concentrate, so there would be a good basis for fruitful interaction.
15. The Taoiseach said that he saw the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body as a more valid interlocutor for the Forum. The Tánaiste commented that the SDLP would not be enamoured of any link with the Select Committee. Deputy Harney said that it might be necessary, at times, to transcend SLDP views or attitudes. The Tánaiste responded that the Government had already done so, as regards the same Select Committee. The Taoiseach concurred recalling that the SDLP had made a strong case to the Government in the past that it should oppose even the very establishment of the Select Committee. The Government had decided not to do so, seeing this as an internal British matter. Deputy Bruton commented that the SDLP were now represented on the Select Committee.

16. The Opposition Leaders asked who the Government had in mind for the chair of the Forum. The Taoiseach and Tánaiste said that the Government had yet to settle on a final choice. Deputy Bruton said that the three Opposition parties wished jointly to propose Mr. Maurice Hayes, the former Ombudsman in Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach said that his name had already been canvassed but was not acceptable in one quarter. Deputy Harney said that it was vital that the Chairperson to be perceived as being independent. The Government side referred to the possibility of Judge Catherine McGuinness. Reference was made to the profile of her husband. Deputy Harney said this should not be put down to her account. As the Opposition leaders left, they appeared to accept that Judge McGuinness would be a good chairperson but, with some residual reservations related to her husband's profile, they sought a little more time to consider the matter.

Walter P. Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary
31 October, 1994