



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

31 January 1996

Thank you for your letter of 26 January

First of all, let me say how glad I am that, after a difficult few days, we can now get back to business on a sensible basis. I am determined to use the Mitchell Report and the new opportunities it has presented to make rapid progress towards negotiations and a comprehensive peace settlement.

You suggest two areas on which we should now focus. On the first, I entirely agree that we must keep up the pressure on all parties to commit themselves to the Mitchell Report's principles of democracy and non-violence. I called last week in the House of Commons for the parties unequivocally to endorse them. We will continue to do so.

However, while such commitments clearly would be a major step forward, it is quite clear, not least from comments by David Trimble and Peter Robinson, that the Unionist Parties will not enter all-party negotiations on the basis of these principles alone. There is in their minds the problem of the absence of the consent principle in any recognisable form. The Unionists have also been quick to focus on Mitchell's statement in paragraph 23 of his Report that the commitments to the principles should be "honoured". If we were to attempt to move to talks on the principles alone, we would be bound to face

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calls from the Unionists for evidence that the paramilitaries were indeed honouring their commitments, which of course include the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. Moreover, in doing so, they could quote the Mitchell Report in support of their argument.

It is this, together with the evident blockage over the question of a start to decommissioning, which led me to propose the alternative route to talks of an elective option, your second proposed area of focus. I entirely agree that we must seek an elective model which is broadly acceptable, has an appropriate mandate and respects the three strands. But I am anxious to move faster than your letter would suggest. I want to use the political track and discussions with all the parties to try to obtain agreement on an election based approach as soon as possible.

We have therefore embarked on an intensive series of contacts with the parties. Paddy Mayhew met Gerry Adams yesterday. He and I also met John Hume and Seamus Mallon. I am seeing Ian Paisley today and David Trimble tomorrow, and hope to talk to John Alderdice early next week. Meanwhile, Paddy Mayhew and the Tanaiste will meet tomorrow, following up yesterday's useful liaison group discussions.

I recognise the emotions which my suggestion of an elective way forward has roused on the Nationalist side. Public statements, and the private comments of both Sinn Fein and SDLP leaders, have left us in no doubt about the depth of these emotions. What Paddy Mayhew and I have tried to do is to explain why suspicions of our motives and what we have in mind are unfounded. I cannot say that we have yet been entirely successful, but I hope that we have made some impression that we are proposing an approach which can lead rapidly to the all-party negotiations which both parties have so long sought, and that this approach is worth exploring.

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I made clear to John Hume and Seamus Mallon yesterday that I envisage rapid elections, followed by a meeting of the elected forum (whatever name is finally chosen) to nominate negotiators. This would be followed, again in our view speedily, by the beginning of the all-party negotiations. I underlined to them that I have yet to discuss these ideas in any detail with the Unionists or others. I cannot guarantee in advance of these discussions that they will agree to what I propose. But I will do my best to persuade them.

This account of my thinking is obviously sensitive, and I know you will treat it as such. I continue to hope that, for your part, you will be able to encourage all parties to keep their options open. With luck, our next meeting could be the occasion to mark major progress towards a comprehensive negotiated peace settlement.

Yours sincerely  
John H.

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Oifig an Taoisigh  
Office of the Taoiseach

26 January, 1996.

The Right Honourable John Major, MP  
Prime Minister.

Dear *John*

I have now had the opportunity to study your letter of 25 January and to speak to Dick Spring and other Government colleagues on the Irish Government position.

My proposal is that both Governments now use the intensified political track to

1. Put the principles of the Mitchell Report and the Report's approach to decommissioning to all the parties and ask them to agree to accept and honour them. Acceptance would form the basis of a move to all party talks by end February which is our joint firm aim as agreed in the Communiqué of 28 November.
2. Provide for a discussion of the elective process question to see if there are any proposals in this area which can meet the Mitchell Report test, i.e. be broadly acceptable, have an appropriate mandate and respect the three strands. The Irish Government position is that it is premature to reach a conclusion on whether such proposals can be arrived at until the discussion in the political track has been brought to a conclusion. If the criterion of broad acceptability is to be met, the unionists parties must persuade the nationalists parties that their fears are unfounded. The political track is there for exactly that purpose.

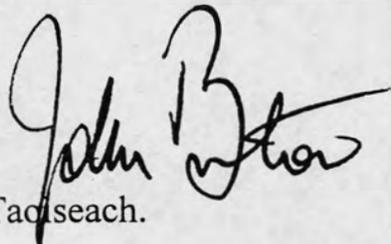
Oifig an Taoisigh  
Office of the Taoiseach

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I would ask then that you consider this proposal as the basis for forward movement. This approach by both Governments could create the space in which the "election" issue might be discussed in a less confrontational manner. Matters could be taken forward on this basis by Dick Spring and Paddy Mayhew.

I hope you will find my proposal helpful.

Yours sincerely,

  
Taoiseach.