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faxed to Tim D. Sea-O'Neil.

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THE PRIME MINISTER

25 January 1996

Dear John,

It was good to talk to you on the telephone again on Tuesday evening, and helpful that we were each aware of the other's line of thinking. I was grateful for a sight of the Tanaiste's draft statement to the Dail before he made it and hope that the text of what I was going to say was of similar assistance at your end.

The reactions to what I said have, not surprisingly, been mixed. There is strong cross-party support here. The Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders were very supportive. But the nationalist side is naturally suspicious that we are erecting a new pre-condition for talks. Nothing could be further from my mind. The Unionists will not go to all-party talks in present circumstances. What I therefore want to do is pursue a route which I genuinely believe can lead to the all-party talks - which all agree are necessary.

I am confident that the suspicions of both the SDLP and Sinn Fein about an elective process can be overcome unless they are fed by malicious tongues. I have already made it crystal clear that there is no question of returning to an old-style Stormont assembly with legislative and administrative powers. What we are proposing is an election for the sole purpose of getting all parties round the same table. The Unionists have said clearly that they will sit down with Sinn Fein in these circumstances, even before decommissioning starts. We have not said that an elected body itself will be the negotiating forum. We have

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also deliberately left open details such as numbers, voting system, etc. What we are seeking is a scheme which is broadly acceptable and capable of attracting support from both sides of the community. Any scheme must, of course, be consistent with the three-stranded analysis and agenda, and provide an appropriate role for both governments.

We will therefore be making every effort to persuade the SDLP and Sinn Fein to see the advantages of what is proposed for them, and also discussing with them how an election and subsequent talks might be organised to meet everyone's concerns. We have no preconceived ideas. I have already offered an early meeting to John Hume, and hope he will take this up.

I hope that for your part you will also feel able to persuade the Nationalist parties not to spurn this way forward to all-party talks, and close off options. I hope you will also be able to talk to the Unionist parties about what they have in mind. I certainly believe that no political party in a democratic system like ours should stand aside from an election which can help make progress towards peace.

We must also keep up the pressure on all the parties to commit themselves fully and unequivocally to the six principles in the Mitchell Report, and to honouring them, and to the Body's recommendations on decommissioning. Such commitments would be a major step forward and could only increase confidence all round.

We continue to hope that the paramilitaries will agree to a start to decommissioning now, which would open the way for the all-party talks we still want to see by the end of February. But as I made clear in my statement to the

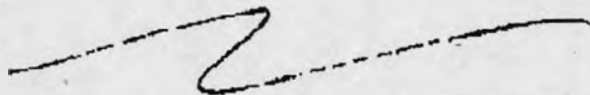
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House, if the paramilitaries still will not do so, we are prepared to contemplate decommissioning in parallel to the all-party talks we believe will follow an election.

Our two governments must continue to work as closely together as possible. I know Patrick Mayhew will want to take forward the intensification of the political discussions with all the parties as rapidly as possible, and to do so in close co-operation with you and your colleagues. Meanwhile can I underline how unhelpful it would be if distorted accounts of what passed between us continue to get into the press. It will make doing business together much more difficult if they do.

I look forward to our next meeting and to reviewing progress with you then. Our offices are in touch about when this might be.

Yours Ever,
John Bruton



Mr. John Bruton, T.D.