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Lord Alderdice of Knock  
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland  
88 University Street  
BELFAST  
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17 April 1998

*Dear Lord Alderdice*

***NORTHERN IRELAND (ELECTIONS) BILL***

I am writing to set out our plans for immediate legislation in the aftermath of the Agreement. We need to take urgent steps to permit the holding of a referendum and, in the event of a positive result, Assembly elections, in accordance with the terms of the Agreement.

I envisage that three pieces of legislation will be discussed in the House of Commons this Wednesday. In addition to the Referendum Order, there will also be an Order, which I am required by statute to make, to bring to an end the Forum. I envisage that most of our time will be given over, however, to the Northern Ireland (Elections) Bill, which will constitute the new Assembly, and provide for elections to it.

We are seeking to put through the Bill now because there will not be a long enough interval between the referendum and the beginning of an Assembly election campaign to permit us to be sure of enacting it then. But the Bill will make express provision to ensure there will be no elections unless there is a majority in favour of the Agreement in the referendum.

Most of the Bill will relate to elections matters and will of course reflect the terms of the Agreement. There will also be, later, an Order making technical provision for the election. The Bill will also make provision in order to get the Assembly up and running during the first part of its shadow phase. These provisions are intended to permit the Assembly to take all the preparatory steps envisaged across the whole range of the Agreement during this phase. They are temporary in nature, and will be supplanted when the main Bill implementing the Agreement is brought forward later in the year.



In order to start the Assembly off, I should be empowered to provide it with its initial standing orders and to appoint an interim Chair and deputy Chair. The standing orders would permit elections of shadow Ministers, and enable the Assembly to choose its own chair and deputy chair (in line with the terms of the Agreement). I should also have a power to refer issues to the Assembly, and in particular ones relating to all aspect of the Agreement. I stress that I have no wish to become more involved than necessary in the Assembly's workings, and I should exercise my powers under the Bill consulting the parties as far as possible, and in the spirit of the Agreement.

Once the main Bill is enacted, the Assembly would be able to approve its own standing orders, and make further progress with arrangements relating to Strand Two and Three issues, prior to assuming legislative responsibility. The interim provisions would fall away.

We should be very happy to try and deal with any questions you may have about the Bill, and to arrange, if that would be helpful, an oral briefing, if at all possible.

*Yrs Sincerely*  
*J. Mowlam*  
MARJORIE MOWLAM

(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in her absence)