



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Blair issues fugitive terrorists with a 'Get out of Jail Free' card!



The Blair Government's proposed legislation to allow paramilitary fugitives to return to NI, without serving a prison sentence, as expected, was passed when it was debated in the Commons. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats joined unionists and the SDLP in opposing the bill. NI Secretary Peter Hain denied the fugitives were getting an easy option. "It's part of bringing closure to NI's past, just as after the Agreement over 400 paramilitary prisoners were released on licence," he said. "If they

breached the terms of these licences, as some did, they were hauled back in and this could happen to these people who are now outside the reach of the UK jurisdiction. "This will bring them to justice, although they will not serve a prison sentence, but if they breach the terms of their licence they will be hauled in and have to serve their sentence."

The proposals cover up to 150 people, wanted for crimes committed before the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Northern Ireland police chief, Sir Hugh Orde highlighted what he considers flaws in the legislation. "It would be possible for someone to go back and live next door to the person they are accused of the murder of."

The proposals have proved deeply unpopular with victims, and public representatives are calling for those covered by the legislation to face some form of tribunal. The Act is due to come into effect in 2007 and Sir Hugh confirmed that until then police would continue to pursue and charge suspects in the normal way. "Potentially, as there are about 2,000 unsolved murders alone, there are over 2,000 people who, if the inquiry team came to a position where it felt it was able to arrest people - which is not going to happen - could avail themselves of the legislation when charged," he said.

Sop To Sinn Fein

Sinn Fein has repeatedly pressed for these fugitives to be able to return home. If the legislation is passed, paramilitary fugitives would have their cases heard by a special tribunal, at which they do not even have to appear! If found guilty, they would be freed on licence without having to go to jail.

Unionists and terrorist victims expressed their outrage at the law, calling it an effective amnesty. Mark Durkan, of the SDLP, said many countries had attempted a truth process, and although none has been perfect, "all have been better than this". "Because there is no time limit on the legislation, those responsible for the 2,100 unsolved killings can sit back and wait to see if the police ever come knocking on their door," he said. "If they do, then they can apply to be an on-the-run from the comfort of their own homes. Sinn Fein



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even negotiated with the British government that the killers don't have to turn up in court and listen to how they shattered victims' lives."

No Shame

Unionists have attacked the Prime Minister for his "double standards" on terrorism in Ulster and around the world. On the one hand, Mr Blair comes down hard on terrorists in his anti-terror bill, but on the other gives an amnesty to republican fugitives. Mr Blair's demand for 90-day holding periods for terrorist suspects in London is completely inconsistent with his policies in Northern Ireland. None of these facts however, can raise a blush on Blair's face!