



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Mandelson says IRA escapees free to return

In what amounts to an amnesty, the British Government has said it will not be seeking the extradition of convicted paramilitaries who would have been eligible for early release under the Good Friday Agreement. It applies to 21 cases dating back 20 years and means the government will not press for the return of fugitives who escaped from prison, and fled to other countries, before finishing their sentences.

Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson, who made the announcement, said it was "clearly anomalous" to pursue such a course for people who would have little, if any, of their original sentence left. "I do not believe that it would be proportionate or in the public interest to continue to pursue such cases," he said. "I do not under-estimate the hurt this decision may cause the victims of those whose extradition will no longer be pursued, and the onus it places on all of us to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement does result in a permanent peace in which there are no more victims."

The new ruling would apply to the likes of IRA double murderer Liam Averill, who escaped from the Maze prison dressed as a woman in December 1997, and Diarmuid Finucane, the brother of the murdered Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane. Also included are convicted IRA murderers Kevin Barry Artt and Jim Smith, who were among 38 prisoners who escaped from the Maze Prison, near Belfast, in 1983 in the largest jailbreak in British history. A prisoner officer was murdered in that escape but this is now to go unpunished in order to appease the ISinn FeinRA. It is a crime to escape jail. But this too will go unpunished. This is the justice of the "Peace Agreement."

The Ulster Unionist security spokesman Ken Maginnis said both the security scale down and the prisoners decision were an insult.

But the decision has been welcomed by Sinn Fein's Alex Maskey. "This is a useful first step in tackling this important issue. It will undoubtedly come as a relief to those individuals and their families who have lived with the threat of extradition for many years." This can only serve as a final nail in Trimble's political coffin.