

STEPHEN GLOVER: Dine with IRA killers, your Majesty, and it will be Al Qaeda terrorists next

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Should terrorists who killed and maimed and bombed during Northern Ireland's 30 years of violence be granted an amnesty and treated as though their sins had never been committed?

Most decent people are surely appalled by the idea, yet it is what Peter Hain, Labour Northern Ireland Secretary from 2005 to 2007, is proposing.

He wants everything forgiven and forgotten, and a veil drawn over the cold-blooded murder of innocent women and children.

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I'm sure it's a view secretly shared by many in government. One guest at a Windsor Castle banquet last night was Martin McGuinness, a former Provisional IRA commander, now Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. The Queen was instructed to invite him.

Few would dispute that the banquet had something to celebrate. It was held in honour of Michael D. Higgins, the first Irish President to pay a state visit to Britain since the Republic won independence nearly a century ago. Our two countries can at last be true friends.

Shabby

But why was it necessary to invite Mr McGuinness? Former Tory minister Peter Lilley, a man of undoubted integrity and honesty, once alleged in the House of Commons this former Provisional IRA Army Council member had told him he had 12 Catholic informers killed in Northern Ireland.



Controversial: The Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland has joined Michael D Higgins during the four-day state visit

Mr McGuinness appeared in a Dublin court in 1973 after being found close to a car filled with 250 lb of explosive and 5,000 rounds of ammunition. As a senior Provisional IRA commander in Londonderry in the early Seventies, he was not in the business of handing out sweets.

The British state has decided to forgive this awful man, to rehabilitate him and treat him as though he had never killed a fly. Two years ago, the Queen was made to shake his hand and now she has been forced to have him dine at her table.

All this might — just might — be tolerable if Mr McGuinness had uttered a single word of regret for the deaths of hundreds of people at the hands of the IRA. But like the rest of his gang, he hasn't, and there is no

likelihood that he ever will.

If Mr Hain has his way, the indulgence shown by the British Government to McGuinness and other former terrorists who have swapped their Armalites for chauffeur-driven limousines will be extended to those responsible for the 3,000 unsolved murders during the Troubles.

Labour and Mr Hain have quite a record for sparing suspected terrorists. Six weeks ago, John Downey, a convicted IRA terrorist, was told he would not face prosecution for the Hyde Park bombing in July 1982, which killed four soldiers and seven horses, and injured 31 people. The reason was he was sent an official letter in 2007 wrongly informing him he was not wanted by the police.

This distressing case high-lighted a shabby secret deal made by Tony Blair and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams — also a former IRA commander, though he will not admit it. Under this agreement, nearly 200 suspected IRA fugitives received similar letters effectively giving them amnesty.

Mr Hain — who was the Labour Northern Ireland Secretary most sympathetic to the Republicans, which is saying something — now wants to go the whole hog. The British Government should not listen.



Meeting: Irish President Michael D Higgins and the Queen pose for a photograph ahead of a State Banquet. It comes three years after Elizabeth II made a groundbreaking trip to the republic

He equates British soldiers with IRA and Loyalist killers. Do not prosecute members of the Parachute Regiment over the Bloody Sunday killings in 1972, he says, and do not prosecute ex-terrorists. It is imperative that we mustn't be misled by his apparent even-handedness.

Of course, there were cases when British troops and RUC policemen acted unlawfully, and if there is evidence against them they should be brought to justice like everyone else. But there were far, far more atrocities at the hands of IRA and Loyalist terrorists.

That's what Sinn Fein/IRA want — to establish a false equivalence so their killers are let off. On Monday, Francie Molloy, Sinn Fein MP for Mid Ulster, suggested exactly this — that the amnesty proposed by Mr Hain should apply to all sides.

It is central to the IRA's mythology that its killers were fighting a legitimate war as soldiers. It's nonsense, of course. They were fighting the dirtiest war imaginable against a democratically elected government, and they represented only a tiny minority of the Northern Ireland population.

Whatever wrongs British soldiers may have done pale into insignificance when placed next to the outrages committed by IRA and Loyalist thugs. Our soldiers did not deliberately shoot dead innocent people in cold blood or set off bombs killing and maiming innocent bystanders.

Even today, terrible crimes from the Troubles remain unsolved. Ivor Bell, a former IRA member, will appear in court later this week charged with aiding and abetting the murder of Jean McConville, who was abducted, tortured and shot in 1972 because the IRA suspected her of being an informant.

Pernicious

It is suggested that taped interviews of former IRA terrorists name Gerry Adams as the IRA commander who ordered Mrs McConville's murder. This allegation has been aired before, in a book published in 2010 by Ed Moloney, a respected Dublin-based journalist.

According to Moloney, Adams was responsible for setting up the IRA unit that murdered and clandestinely buried at least nine people — the so-called 'Disappeared' — in the Seventies, including Jean McConville, though Adams denies any involvement.

Have British soldiers ever been accused of behaving in a remotely similar way? Of course not. That is why the notion of 'moral equivalence' is so pernicious.



The IRA, and the only marginally less deadly Loyalist paramilitaries, were in a category of their own where cruelty and barbarity reigned. They have already enjoyed far too much leeway as a result of Tony Blair's secret deals.

Doesn't the family of Jean McConville have a right to see justice done? And all the families of the Disappeared? And the relatives and friends of the hundreds of innocent victims in Northern Ireland and on the mainland butchered by Martin McGuinness's and Gerry Adams's former comrades?

Injustice

Patrick Corrigan, of Amnesty International, puts it very well when he says: 'It is regrettable that senior political figures continue to show such disregard for one of the abiding lessons of conflict resolution. One cannot build a stable peace on a rocky foundation of injustice.'

Hear, hear. By the way, don't believe those who say that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Hain's old stamping ground) granted amnesty to hundreds of killers. Only those guilty of less heinous crimes were exempted from justice, and very many applications for amnesty were, in fact, rejected.

Peter Hain and, I fear, some in this Government, would deprive families and relatives of the only thing they have left — the opportunity to understand what happened to those whom they loved, and the satisfaction of justice. No government should ever take that away.

And we will all be less safe if it does. An Al Qaeda terrorist plotting to blow up innocent British civilians or perhaps a diehard Republican terrorist in Belfast still planting bombs will look at Martin McGuinness being feted at Windsor Castle and terrorists escaping trial.

Such people may justifiably wonder whether, after all the atrocities they have in mind to commit, the British state will one day forgive and forget — and they'll even end up dining with the Queen.

Glad though I am that there is mostly peace in Northern Ireland, I fear it is being bought at a terrible price.



Groundbreaking: The Queen shakes Martin McGuinness' hand at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast