



Jail releases a key factor

AS the negotiations are moving into their final stage, much attention has been paid to a Northern Ireland Assembly and North-South co-operation.

Proposals by the two Governments and all parties on these two issues exist in abundance.

In stark contrast is the virtual absence of proposals pertaining to the issue of political prisoners. Prisoners have been relegated to the margins of this political process from the beginning as an issue that both Governments and the larger parties feel uncomfortable with.

But let us make no mistake, the issue of political prisoners is at the heart of this process and their release must be addressed as part of the overall settlement if lasting peace and stability are to be achieved.

Underlying the lack of movement on prisoners are a number of assumptions about the release of politically motivated prisoners. The first one is the notion that the release of political prisoners would undermine the justice system. That is unfounded.

The justice system accommodated the conflict through special legislation such as the Emergency Provisions Act and Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Equally, mechanisms perfectly compatible with the justice system can be set in place in order to deal with prisoner releases. Indeed, the UDP proposes a commission to deal with this issue.

The next assumption is that the release of politically motivated prisoners would increase the potential for violence. In fact, the opposite is true.

The release of these prisoners would cement any settlement and ensure stability, while not releasing these prisoners would provide their organisations with further cause for violence.

Then there is also the belief that releasing prisoners before the end of their sentences would be offensive to the victims. This is true for some victims, but, at the same time, is not true for others.

What should happen to political prisoners in the event of a talks agreement? Should they remain locked up or should they be freed? The Ulster Democratic Party's talks negotiator JOHN WHITE argues that their release is a key element of any deal.

There are as many victims who support the release of prisoners to ensure peace and to enable a process of truth and reconciliation as there are victims who oppose it.

So the real question that members of this society must ask themselves when they oppose the prisoner release is whether they really have the victims' interests in mind.

This leads me to the final assumption that needs to be addressed, namely that the peace process can work without the release of political prisoners.

I, for one, believe it cannot. A settlement which is only endorsed by part of the population will not produce lasting peace and stability.

Indeed, if excluding political representatives for the paramilitaries had been possible, why did it not work at Sunningdale or the Brooke-Mayhew talks?

A resolution of this conflict will only be successful if all sections of society are part of the settlement — including political prisoners.

Since the deadline for agreement is getting close, I want to look at the practicalities of this issue.

The UDP proposes the establishment of a commission of political prisoners. The commission's mandate would be to investigate the issues critical to the release of these prisoners.

The remit of the commission would be to establish the criteria, to draw up a time frame and to decide upon the mechanism for release.

Related issues such as the re-integration of prisoners into society and the needs of victims should also be considered. The commission would then make recom-

mendations to the two Governments, which in return, would set in motion necessary legal steps.

We believe that a commission would be the appropriate means to address the issue of political prisoners as there has been no willingness by either politicians or the Governments to do so.

The fate of the political prisoners has not been a priority for unionists and nationalists to the same degree that it has been for loyalists and republicans. Indeed, the opposite could be argued.

Moreover, in light of an upcoming assembly election, the release of prisoners should be removed from partisan politics.

The commission would also release civil servants from dealing with this issue. The Civil Service, by definition not one to take risks, has in the past been inadequate in addressing the release of political prisoners.

One could even go as far as saying that civil servants have been obstructive, slow, and unsympathetic from the outset. For the sake of speedy resolution of this conflict, the issue of political prisoners should be extricated from the web of bureaucracy and administration.

The Northern Ireland peace process still has some way to go. The prisoner issue must be resolved for the sake of peace and reconciliation.

The establishment of a commission, a time frame for release which should be no longer than two years, and an agreement in principle on the release of prisoners, must all be in place before the final stages of the political settlement — if lasting peace and stability are to be achieved.



Christmas parole: But they must be let out for good if peace is to be achieved.

'We will endeavour to make sure a peace settlement is reached'

ANNIE CAMPBELL, (right) a Women's Coalition talks negotiator, says the group has played a vital role in the talks and is definitely here to stay.



last 30 years in Northern Ireland.

The negotiations in Castle Buildings have been unique, precisely because they have included those groups whose alienation has, in the past, served only to gridlock any peace process.

The Women's Coalition, the UDP, the PUP and the Labour Coalition, have been crucial in broadening the remit of Northern Ireland politics. This pluralism and diversity are the healthy ingredients of any new assembly.

Alongside the assembly a civic forum will ensure this diversity. Such a 'people's forum' will bring together representatives from the community/voluntary groups, trade unions and the business world.

Our civic society has been the lifeblood of Northern Ireland for the last 30 years — this input needs to be developed as we seek a strong future. We would expect parties that are committed to promoting social and economic developments would welcome this.

Does anyone really think that we would be where we are now, on the verge of an historic agreement, if there had not been a groundswell from communities for a peace agreement.

As well as insisting that other voices are heard — non-sectarian, positive voices, committed to building trust and co-operation — our central principles include respect for human rights and equality for all citizens.

It is essential that there should be proper support for victims of violence, irrespective of background. As we come out of the conflict, we will also have to find ways of resolving the thorny issues of prisoners and policing.

The Women's Coalition has entered mainstream politics: we won't be going away. We will be standing for election because we believe that our contribution to the peace talks has been vital. More vital will be our contribution to the lasting peace.

ONE day to go. Northern Ireland is holding its breath; waiting, praying, not daring to hope, but longing for a breakthrough.

Women are used to waiting, accustomed to the ways of patience, the idea of process (the baby becomes the child, then becomes the adult). We've learnt patience well. We have also learnt anger, and frustration.

The Women's Coalition got tired of waiting — we made the leap, were voted into the peace talks, and we've been honestly committed (amidst all the juggling of kids and caring responsibilities) to reaching an honourable agreement.

We believe we're on course for that — the time for failure is past. We can begin to put the injustices and horror behind us, and start to build a future for all our children.

And we will be in there, using all our skills to ensure that settlement.

The "three strands" come down to this:

- To live and share power as equals in Northern Ireland (the Assembly)
- To build mutually beneficial relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (the North-South Ministerial Council)
- To develop partnership between the new govern-

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ments of Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Council of the Isles).

People in the Republic of Ireland will be asked to make a substantial contribution to the resolution of the conflict, through accepting changes to the Irish constitution.

All of this can be done.

We draw together women from nationalist and unionist communities. We have learnt to look at the conflict in Northern Ireland through the eyes of those whose traditions are not our own.

We have succeeded, and we believe that many around the table have learnt from our example. Problem solving remains our strength.

We came into this insisting that everyone be included: determined to make a space for women. When people have been excluded — Sinn Fein and the UDP — we have argued strongly that no one should be excluded.

Those that claim that one voting system alone, is sacrosanct, have closed their minds to new thinking. We want a voting system that will open up politics — give people the opportunity to think new thoughts, dream new dreams.

It would be a disaster if a future assembly returned to the kind of polarised politics that have characterised the

Attacks bring hope of change

Dr Colin Irwin, who compiled and analysed the Queen's University/Rowntree Trust opinion polls published in the Belfast Telegraph last Tuesday and Wednesday, replies to his critics...

BOTH Robert McCartney and Ian Paisley Jr have openly attacked the Belfast Telegraph

	All of NI	Protestant	Catholic	DUP	PUP+UDP	UUP	Alliance	SDLP	Sinn Fein
Yes	74%	88%	59%	81%	71%	94%	87%	81%	20%

when they have not liked the results of my public opinion surveys or the way in which they were presented.

Last Friday, I got a phonecall from a party complaining that I had not published the results of their questions in last week's articles.

Perhaps they thought I was following Government instructions as

outlined in the recently leaked Northern Ireland Office document: "It will be important to ensure that not all of the results of opinion polls, etc will be in the public domain."

"It would be open to us to encourage some degree of public opinion polling... where we believe the results are likely to be supportive."

Before anyone is

interviewed for one of my polls they are told that: "The results of the survey will be analysed and widely published in the local Press and in reports that will be sent to all 10 parties who have been elected to take part in the Stormont Talks."

Of course I cannot publish all the statistics in the Belfast Telegraph, there are simply too many, and I must edit them down to the essential few that illustrate the issues under examination. But all the parties, including the one that included me, have all the results to do with as they wish.

The theme of the last opinion poll was a comprehensive settlement and its alternatives.

The question and results, which the party who phoned me wanted to see in print, are as follows: "If any of the main paramilitary organisations breaches their ceasefire would you support the Government intro-

ducing new legal measures to suppress terrorism?" When I was at Stormont last Wednesday to give the parties their reports I had to tell Sinn Fein the stories to be published that day could be a bitter pill for them.

There was little support for the non-partisan Sinn Fein agenda. A member of their delegation said: "That's OK Colin, we have been there before."

I am sorry Robert McCartney and Ian Paisley Jr are unable to take the occasional hard knock with such good grace.

The leaked Government document went on to say: "We have now been commissioned... to have both quantitative and qualitative research carried out, without it being seen to be Government inspired..."

I am not a part of this conspiracy. The NIO has had grave misgivings about me since I successfully brought a

series of human rights complaints against the British state for forcing children to go to segregated schools against their wishes.

I had hoped to meet with Dr Mo Mowlam when she took office with a view to improving relations between myself and her Civil Service. We have much in common, we are both social anthropologists with an interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland. But her Civil Service have always kept me from her door.

Because I am so single-minded and outspoken I am, in Government circles, considered to be a loose cannon. Let me tell you now that I am not a loose cannon at all.

I am tightly lashed down to the deck of my own small vessel of which I am master and I use my ammunition with great care. I do not sail on the ship of state.

You might ask if I get discouraged or upset when politicians attack the bearer of what they consider bad news.

My answer is: "No I don't." On the contrary, such attacks lift my spirits and fill my heart with hope because experience tells me change is at hand."

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