

Progressive Unionist Party Conference 11/10/1997

Speech by Prisons Spokesperson

William Smith

One can tell by the feelings expressed in the motions on Prisoners here today how deeply this issue is close to our hearts and how frustrated we in the P.U.P. , our Prisoners and their families feel at the lack of movement on Loyalist Prisoners three years into a ceasefire. Especially when it is contrasted with the rapid movement on Republican Prisoners.

During exploratory talks with the Government we put forward an imaginative and constructive paper on Prisoners in January 1995 which we believed left the Government with ample choices for movement on Prisoners. Still today the Government neither imaginatively nor constructively, on any of those issues.

HAS MOVED

Repeatedly we have met with all levels of Government, including 2 Prime Ministers and have got no response from either of them. If you were to ask me what the Government has given Loyalists in recognition of the maintenance of the Loyalist. I would have to tell you "nothing"!

CEASEFIRE

In sharp contrast when the I.R.A. called their first ceasefire in 1994 the Government moved quickly and transferred Republican Prisoners to Prisons in Northern Ireland and the Republic. The Irish Government responded by granting the early release of Republican Prisoners.

So in 1994 we were given nothing while the I.R.A. were pandered to .

In February 1995, when the Peace lay buried in the rubble of Canary Wharf and the spectre of a return to an all out bloody and vicious war loomed before us it was the Loyalist Paramilitaries, the Loyalist Prisoners and the Loyalist Parties who rescued us all from the abyss of war.

When we asked the Government for concessions on Prisoners to help maintain a fragile ceasefire, which was under great strain from I.R.A. provocation, we again received nothing. All through the Manchester and German bomb attacks we made representations to Government for help in shoring up the Loyalist ceasefire and each time we received nothing.

Do you know where you were on the day of the I.R.A. bombing of Theipval? I know where I was! I was with a P.U.P. delegation inside Long Kesh meeting with 40

Loyalist Prisoners to discuss the Peace Process. While we were engaged in constructive dialogue about a peaceful way forward again the thunderous noise of 2 I.R.A. bombs shattered the peace.

Again this country lay on the edge of an abyss, the Loyalist ceasefire hanging by a thread, and again it was the Loyalist Paramilitaries, the Loyalist Prisoners and the Loyalist Parties who brought this country back from the brink.

As we walked the tight rope between peace and war we asked the Government for help and again they left us high and dry.

Is it any wonder then that two weeks after the I.R.A. call a second ceasefire when the Government announce further concessions to I.R.A. Prisoners that all hell should break loose within the Loyalist Camp. Is it any surprise that Loyalist Prisoners ^{SHOULD} be furious and demand of us why after 3 years of supporting the peace process they couldn't get transferred from one cell to another while 2 weeks into another I.R.A. ceasefire Republican Prisoners were getting moved all over the place. The actions of the Government succeeded in doing what I.R.A. bombs had failed to do, they destroyed our credibility among our own constituency.

This week history was made at the talks at Stormont. The P.U.P. played a full and constructive roll as they have done since talks began. We entered into substantive negotiations and now we say quite clearly that we now demand substantive movement on Prisoners.

1. The introduction of a time scale for the phased release of all Loyalist Prisoners.
2. The immediate introduction of 66% remission.
3. The immediate release of all Loyalist Prisoners who have served 10 years or more.

These are the measures that is needed and the main points that we have put to Government.

At this point I wish to digress but still remain relative to the prisoner issue.

Firstly, I wish to talk about Victims.

When Prisoner Releases are mentioned, emotionalism is brought into the equation, people should feel emotional, and so should we!

We represent the communities who have borne the brunt of I.R.A. bombs and bullets, we have pulled the battered, bruised and breathless bodies of men, women and children from beneath the debris of bombed out buildings and lethal car bombs.

We have seen the lifeblood of friends and comrades drain from their bodies as a result of Republican violence and carried many a coffin from all our areas.

No-one need tell us about pain and suffering.

The second theme I wish to talk about is brutality.

Yes , brutality, for you need to know.

You need to know about the brutality of Prisons and their Government masters.

I remember, and some of you here, would also. In 1974 when Volunteer Hugh McClean lay dying in Long Kesh prison in front our very own eyes. We made representations to have him released on medical grounds but to no avail, he died there in a prison bed beside us and we felt powerless.

Also, Volunteer Tom Mawhinney who lay ill in Prison and despite serving a short sentence they refused to release him. Eventually, they moved him to Hospital to die.

I would like also to mention Volunteer Bobby Spence the brother of our esteemed member and colleague Gusty who died in Gusty's arms in Long Kesh camp.

Volunteer Davy McNaught died in Magilligan Camp.

State sponsored brutality was systematically practiced and endorsed in Belfast Prison under the title of "criminalisation".

Here in Northern Ireland where 20,000 British Soldiers, 16,000 Policemen, concrete walls and miles of barbed wire were used to kept both communities apart.

The Government and Prison Service saw things different as they extended their policy to forced integration of Loyalist and Republican Prisoners

Loyalists were physically forced by sadistic prison officers to share wings and facilities with Republicans. They were placed in cells adjacent to Republicans. When Loyalists refused to mix with Republicans they were punished, locked up in their cells.

Fights and confrontations occurred daily with many injuries on both sides. The Government and Prison Service pursued this policy vigorously sometimes orchestrating situations that resulted in fights and injuries between Loyalists and Republicans.

We warned the Government, the Prisoners warned the Government that sooner or later someone was going to be Killed but the Prison Service evilly pursued this policy with more vigour.

Sadly our predictions came true one night when Republicans detonated a bomb in the prison canteen killing two Loyalist Prisoners Volunteer Colin Caldwell and U.D.A. Prisoner Robert Skey.

The most damning thing of it all was that even when these killings occurred the Government continued to practice this evil policy. Loyalist Prisoners families were living in torment throughout this whole period.

A few years ago U.V.F. Prisoners were brutalised in Long Kesh when they were handcuffed to beds and denied medical treatment.

The third theme I would like to touch on is sectarianism.

We did not create sectarianism , sectarianism created us all! From segregated housing, segregated schools, segregated sports, segregated leisure facilities, segregated churches to segregated social life. This society created and sustains sectarianism. 

You may say what has that to do with Prisoners ? Over the years the vast majority of Loyalist Prisoners have re-entered into our society and lead useful and constructive lives. In fact many are to the forefront in our community leading the way in building community relations both in our own communities and across the divide. The release of our prisoners has been an asset to society.

This summer as tension grew throughout the country U.V.F. members and P.U.P. activists where on the ground dampening the flames of sectarianism. They were tested to the limit as sectarian Republican fascists indiscriminately opened fire upon children who were celebrating the Twelfth around their bonfires. Had the U.V.F. wanted to be sectarian they were given every opportunity to do so.

Lastly, I would say to the Government, we are tired of playing games. We demand substantive movement on prisoners now !