

## Injecting Reality into 'On the Runs' Debate

The issue of 'on the runs' is one of the outstanding and difficult issues which we might expect to come up in the peace process.

While we may not want difficult issues like 'On the Runs' to raise their controversial head, our peace process must confront them.

Neither can this issue be dealt with by a single wave of a magic wand – they are not purely legal, legislative, or security problems. Decommissioning was achieved with a combination political pressure,

Alliance party tabled an Assembly motion last week which implied that it could be – apart from their proposals being unworkable they will raise the expectations of victims and the general public.... [ this is the most powerful argument]

The term 'On the Runs' disguises a number of different situation – some people described as 'on the run' were wanted for questioning, others were questioned but never charged, some charged but not convicted, and others escaped from custody after being convicted. It is simplistic to suggest that we can have a 'one size fits all' legal process to wipe away the passed. Some of these people have not been so much as questioned about the crimes of which they are accused, and to suggest they should come into court to admit their guilt and be released is a fantasy.

This issue is not about the rights of people 'on the run' though they too have human and legal rights. This is about the peace process – and how address the challenge they pose. [ difficult argument, because the exiles issue is about their rights]

To attempt to portray anyone who opposed their proposals as an opponent of the peace process is sour grapes. We disagreed with the basis, effectiveness and ... of their Assembly motion and we have clearly stated why. We have been unshrinking in our opposition to intimidation, violence and vigilantism, working on the ground.

The issue of 'on the runs' can not be dealt with out of the context of the peace process and the Troubles, and being selective with that context, and linking it to just one other issue – that of exiles – is not helpful. We should know by now the danger of tying issues together, blocking progress on one outstanding issue until your own demands are met. A number of parties in Northern Ireland are guilty of this approach, but it is the stuff of blackmail, not negotiation.

Instead work must be allowed to continue *in parallel* on all the difficult issues that still face our peace process.

Vision and reality in a peace process – that's why even though we want sectarian divides not to be relevant in NI, but they are, justice, victims and on the runs, difficulties of dealing with our past,

All of us have a vision of how we want to see Northern Ireland and its peace process. What is required is the ability to work within the less than ideal reality that faces us as we come out of years of conflict, and everything that was done during them. We have to hold on to our vision, but to delude ourselves that it is going to be easy to get there is not only misguided but dangerous for the peace process.

Its important that the debate on on the runs reflects the real situation. The Alliance suggestion is to bring them into court, have them admit their guilt and be released on license. There is no precedent for this in international law, and there are serious questions about how it could work in practice. We also need to ask if it is desirable. On the runs include some who have not been questioned, charged or found guilty for crimes. Releasing people without sentence – would that not be equally difficult for the victims?