

ON THE RUNS

We have concerns that this Alliance motion is trying to unhelpfully simplifying the very complicated issue of outstanding convictions for offences before 1998. They want to deal with it legally, but its not just a legal issue. They want to link it to exiles, but not the wider context of security, law and order, decommissioning, the need for confidence building measures and political stability.

No matter how much we want the issues of outstanding convictions, exiles, and continuing paramilitary and organised criminal activity put behind us, they can not be dealt with by a single wave of a legislative magic wand. They will require negotiation, political will, strong leadership confidence building measures on all sides and hard work.

To assume that this issue lies simply with the Government or the courts or focus on only one side of the issue betrays a misunderstanding of the nature of conflict resolution.

To demand that one side simply surrenders themselves to the courts, admits their guilt, be sentenced and released at the pleasure of the court is pure fantasy land.

We should really know by now how unhelpful it is to tie issues together, blocking progress on one outstanding issue until our own demands are met. I say this both to those who would prevent any resolution of the On the Runs issue until exiles are allowed home, and to those who refuse to discuss the exiles issues until reforms on policing are introduced. Rather work must be allowed to continue in parallel on all the difficult issues which still face our peace process. We would not have any progress on policing, decommissioning, devolved government if we hadn't used this approach. Yet today we see an attempt to put another set of chains on the peace process, and hold all progress back.

The origins of these proposals for those on the run came from the Weston Park talks out of a package of measures to progress on a range of fronts, and we can't take it out of that context. There was nothing explicit in the Agreement on On the Runs, but we still need to deal with it. This peace process will have to face up to other issues which come up, even if they are difficult or controversial.

We need to deal with our past, and the deeds that were done in that context. We recognise the importance of the need for truth and accountability: there needs to be a full and proper discussion of the pros and cons of how to do that and we are involved in this from local communities to international practice.

Let me be clear, we are totally opposed to the exclusion and intimidation of people from their homes and we recognise that this is a problem not just in the past but in the future. There is no justification for this in a democratic society, and enough reforms are in place now being put in place to provide proper channels to deal with community problems and conflict. However, as with decommissioning, we call on all those with any influence to use it to end the practice of exiling people.

We focus on practical justice, the justice that comes from resolving conflict, not just ending violence but ending the causes of violence.

In any case the Alliance Party's suggestion to deal with On the Runs, which itself has no precedent in justice or international practice, assumes that one size fits all. There are a number of categories covered by the one term 'on the runs', some of whom have never been questioned, some questioned but not charged, some charged but not convicted and others who were convicted but escaped custody.

To imply that one simplistic and sweeping measure for all these categories, quite apart from the fact it would be unworkable in practice and unfairly raises the expectations of the public and more particularly the victims of the Troubles and is thoroughly unhelpful to dealing with this issue

We believe the SDLP amended motion acknowledges the complexity of the issue, and offers more constructive and creative ways to resolve it.