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The IRA gun club

DONALD DEWAR, the Scottish Secretary, yesterday launched Strathclyde police's campaign to persuade gunowners to turn over their legally held handguns before they are outlawed on October 1: failure to do so could result in a maximum 10-year prison sentence. The moral certainty with which successive governments have gone about curtailing the freedoms of these law-abiding citizens stands in stark contrast with their less rigorous approach towards a very different shooting fraternity — the IRA. Although they are far likelier to kill their fellow men than are the owners of legally held handguns, Irish republicans are none the less treated with much greater care and solicitude.

When dealing with Sinn Fein/IRA, the British and Irish governments are suddenly overcome with circumlocution and sensitivity. Consider last week's paper on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. "The governments acknowledge that the operational and practical implications of securing decommissioning do not affect all of the participants in the same way", it states, gingerly. "Those parties with some record of insight relating to the paramilitary organisations, who alone have the capacity to decommission, have an obvious importance in relation to this agenda, which, realistically, presupposes a fully inclusive process". In short, a member of an

IRA "active service unit" in the "bandit country" of south Armagh will hold on to his RPG-7 rocket launcher for far longer than a member of Glasgow pistol club will hold on to his trusty .38 Smith & Wesson revolver.

Scottish gunowners, take note. Set up a clandestine, subversive society called the Scottish Republican Army, dedicated to the violent overthrow of the Act of Union of 1707. Nurture a grievance culture. Then kill hundreds of policemen and soldiers, mortar 10 Downing Street, and try to blow up the Labour Party conference. Ethnically cleanse the signatories of the Snowdrop petition. Many will, rightly, see you as monsters; but the British state will seek to accommodate you, irrespective of the democratic verdict of the vast majority of people.

Far from being portrayed as sad, squalid figures — mini Thomas Hamiltons, in effect — elements in the media and on the Left will adulate you as freedom fighters. Better still, the world will take an interest in your plight. International human rights organisations and home-grown civil liberties groups will take your part. Hollywood halfwits will queue up to make one-sided, ahistorical films about you. But whatever you do, don't play by the rules. Talk of centuries of oppression, give yourselves plenty of ideological justification for your activities, and the world's your oyster.

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