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## PRISONERS OF POLITICS

Justice has become a casualty of the peace process

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Equality under the law is the cornerstone of civilization, arbitrary justice its dry rot. Men properly convicted of murder should serve the sentence that justice demands, not that which expediency may require.

Although justice may be appropriately tempered by mercy, in Northern Ireland it is being administered through the looking-glass. Men who plotted murder, with malice aforethought and heedless of the inevitable misery, will spend this Christmas with their families and in the knowledge that other colleagues are being released altogether. At the same time two young men who made a terrible mistake under great pressure while risking their own lives for others remain in jail. The IRA's bombers who dine at home this Christmas, and the Scots Guardsmen who languish in jail, are the undeserving beneficiaries and the unfortunate victims of the subversion of justice designed to propitiate the violent.

There is a high political defence for the indulgent treatment of Paul Kavanagh and Thomas Quigley, whose month-long bombing campaign claimed three lives and blighted many more. That defence can be used to justify the Christmas release of Patrick Magee, the Brighton bomber sentenced by a judge who branded him "a man of exceptional cruelty and inhumanity".

These men, and many other prisoners, have a special place in the republican movement and their support for the peace process is vital to the maintenance of the

ceasefire. If they enjoy tangible benefits from the ceasefire, it is argued, they will lend their weight to the argument for its maintenance. But what sort of ceasefire is it that relies on the pampering of calculating killers to keep it in place?

The Christmas release of IRA terrorists is not the only evidence of a political intervention in what should be the autonomous realm of the courts. The continued incarceration of Jim Fisher and Mark Wright, two Scots Guardsmen who killed a suspected terrorist in 1992, can only be understood as an act of appeasement. They made a terrible mistake in shooting an innocent boy, but they acted under pressure in circumstances which their training led them to believe was an ambush. They have served more than five years for an offence similar to that of Lee Clegg, another soldier who killed in error and served three and a half years.

The only justification for their remaining in jail is a fear of inflaming republican feeling. The support for their release expressed by the Tatton MP Martin Bell, who knows first hand about life under fire, should encourage the fair-minded to respond sympathetically to their plight. These young men were serving their country, made a mistake and paid the price. Keeping them in prison for fear of the republican mob is also a mistake. The price will always be a peace that depends on the goodwill of men motivated by malice.