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Opinion

Amnesty a cheaper option for the PM

Friday, January 11, 2008

It's not just the IRA that an amnesty would let off the hook. Chief Reporter Chris Thornton looks at why Gordon Brown hasn't run away from the idea.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown was happy to pay tribute the security forces in Northern Ireland on demand from the DUP this week. But he didn't quite give a direct answer when North Belfast MP Nigel Dodds asked him to "utterly rule out any suggestion of an amnesty for terrorists and criminals".

Two years ago, the DUP had declared the question of a Troubles amnesty "put to rest once and for all" when Tony Blair said there was no intention of bringing one in. But that was before the Consultative Group on the Past - known by its joint chairs, Lord Eames and former Policing Board vice chairman Denis Bradley - indicated that some form of amnesty was on their radar screen.

Mr Brown didn't back away from the idea, either - and actually went some way towards endorsing the Eames-Bradley group, if not the specific idea of an amnesty. The Prime Minister said it "is important that we move forward with reconciliation and I think the efforts on reconciliation that are being made by a number of bodies - including what you referred to - are an important element of building for the future." Which isn't the same as utterly ruling out an amnesty.

What's afoot? From the point of view of the sources in the Eames-Bradley camp who floated the idea, it appears to be simply a case of putting out an idea so it can absorb the flak now. They may hope that when and if the proposal appears in their report later this year, people will be a little more used to it.

And the idea of an amnesty is not simply for its own sake. If the group concludes it's a useful idea, it will be employed to allow people to speak freely about their own roles in the Troubles.

Mr Brown's motives for keeping the door open on the idea may be a little different. Of course, he may simply not wish to interfere with a Government-appointed group still in the midst of its considerations.

But the Government has, or should have, a fair degree of interest in the idea of a Troubles amnesty. Because any substantial examination of the past will put members of the security forces and possibly some of their official and political masters in as much, if not more judicial danger than the 100 or so republicans who remain on the run.

"One of the big questions," said an Eames-Bradley source, "is that on the judicial side of things, it would appear you can put the State and State authorities in the dock. The question is how do you put paramilitaries in the dock when they won't give documents, don't have documents to give?"

In other words, if the Crown hasn't turned up sufficient evidence to nail Martin McGuinness in the past 30 years, it is unlikely to find it now. But the Government kept records, maybe not the best records, as the Billy Wright Inquiry has learned, but there are paper trails and ballistics records and the like that point to murky behaviour by people in official roles. Just ask Lord Stevens, whose long briefing to the Eames-Bradley group had a significant impact on their views about security force manipulation of loyalists and even the IRA.

Any IRA members caught and convicted now would face a maximum of two years in prison. Any members of the security forces who are pursued and convicted - admittedly a big 'if' - wouldn't have the same term limit brought in by the Good Friday Agreement.

Don't forget what brought down the proposed amnesty for IRA on-the-run a couple of years ago. It wasn't the palpable unionist outrage at the idea - it was Sinn Fein's discomfort at the amnesty being extended to members of the security forces. So unionists can grate their teeth all they want. If an amnesty is the cost of a truth telling process, versus the millions spent on judicial inquiries, guess which one Gordon will choose.

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