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Columnists

Our Papers

1983 – the anger and the pride

Andersonstown News Thursday

by Fr Des

The recent BBC programme about the escape of prisoners in 1983 caused, as we might expect, a lot of admiration and a lot of anger.

The issues at the time were very clear. The courts had been subverted by the Diplock system, torture had become routine, judges were admitting evidence which should not have been admitted. In other words, men and women were in prison who had not been proved to have done anything against the law – the courts, constructed and subverted as they were, had become incompetent to prove it even if the people concerned had in fact broken laws.

Therefore, they were unjustly condemned, unjustly imprisoned, so trying to escape was not only normal but justified. That was the argument of onlookers then, that is the argument now. If the state subverts its own laws and justice system, then it can expect extraordinary reactions like well organised prison escapes. Putting people in prison without due process and cause is the primary injustice, not the escapes.

Those who make this case will be condemned, of course. But it is strictly in accord with moral beliefs even of bodies who often err on the side of strictness, church theologians for example. This is quite apart from the insistence of those concerned that they were soldiers involved in a war against bad government, soldiers who believed they had as much right to escape as any German or British prisoners of war. The refusal of a government to admit they had this status is irrelevant. Prisoners act according to their own view of reality, not to that of governments, especially hostile ones.

Two of the men who escaped in 1983 got to Holland and had to face extradition in a court there. That court case in the Hague must have been one of the most complete statements of the situation in Ireland ever given in public, because it described the situation not only from the point of view of social, economic and historical fact, but from a military point of view as well. At the end of one day's court session some of the reporters present were amazed. "What," they asked, "Are these two men, Gerry Kelly and Bik McFarlane doing in this court? They are soldiers, this is no place for

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Top 50

Belfast Business Top 50 announced



them...." The court heard arguments about the morality of escape – under normal British justice systems in Ireland it was difficult to ensure justice, under the political and Diplock systems impossible. Courts in Ireland through political interference had become incompetent.

Today people's anger and pride in this massive escape have not become less.

Whatever the intentions of the BBC – after all, it is a British state agency – it may perhaps have helped bring to the surface what many people hoped would stay under it. Changes have to be made . Some of those changes will hurt. And everyone has a place and must be involved. That is the way after every armed conflict. It can only help if we talk openly and honourably about it. Other countries had to face similar realities after the second world war.

Some realities were so painful that they could have caused civil wars, in France for example where opponents had to cooperate in economics, education and justice. The need to find a way of living decently became uppermost. And, whether people liked them or not, workable political solutions just had to follow.

Leading South Belfast restaurateur Michael Deane toasts his inclusion in the Belfast Media Group's fourth annual Belfast Business Top 50 listing. The top chef will be recognised, along with 49 other recipients, at a glittering event in Stormont's Great Hall this Thursday, 25 September. Click on the image to see all of this year's recipients.



Love and Marriage

The Wedding Planner



Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue... well, it may not be all that, but it is the premier guide to getting married this year. Click on the front page (right) to read more.

