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Home	UK news	World news	<b>Politics</b>	Business & Media	Comment & Leaders	Focus	7 Days
Sport	Review	Travel	Cash	Observer Woman	The Observer Magazine	Food	Music

### Politics

## Prosecuting IRA fugitives 'not in public interest'

Henry McDonald, Ireland editor  
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[The Observer](#)

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Prosecutions of IRA fugitives and members of the security forces accused of collusion are to be dropped in the 'public interest', it was claimed last night.

The UK's Director of Public Prosecutions and the Attorney General are to be asked to shelve cases against on-the-run republicans as part of a final deal between Sinn Fein and Downing Street.

The government is also asking that no charges be brought against policemen and soldiers accused of colluding with loyalists. These include those named in files sent to the DPP by Sir John Stevens as part of his inquiry into the murder of lawyer Pat Finucane in 1989.

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The SDLP justice spokesman, Alex Attwood, said the party had information that the fugitives will be able to return to Northern Ireland soon. 'I'm confident that the British government will use the same ploy they used in the Saudi arms controversy. It will not be in the public interest either to prosecute the on-the-runs or those named in the Stevens file, which was handed to the DPP three years and eight months ago.'

Irish government sources pointed out there have been several agreements involving Tony Blair's administration and Sinn Fein in the build-up to devolution restoration day on 26 March.

Peter Hain, the Northern Ireland Secretary, has admitted that the government will no longer use parliamentary legislation to grant the on-the-runs amnesties. In 2005 a government bill dealing with the issue was sabotaged by an alliance of Tories, Liberal Democrats, unionists and a number of backbench Labour MPs.

Meanwhile, several senior retired RUC officers are considering their next move following devastating criticism of the now defunct force's Special Branch in the report by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, Nuala O'Loan, on the killing of Raymond McCord by the

## Ulster Volunteer Force in 1997.

A senior ex-RUC officer made clear that, if there was another 'Operation Ballast' - the codename for the ombudsman's latest investigation - some officers would consider 'outing' a number of informers, including several leading republicans. A number of them refused to co-operate with her inquiry team because they claim the ombudsman's office didn't make clear whether they were being questioned as part of a criminal investigation or a public inquiry.

'Another similar inquiry would push people to the edge,' said the officer, who has had more than 25 years in counter-terrorism operations. 'A lot of these men have knowledge about the war, and what they would have to say might have huge ramifications for the entire political process.'

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