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*The* **Guardian**

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### Free the gunmen

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Thursday January 8, 1998

In the present crisis at the Irish peace talks, Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam has ruled out an extended programme of releasing jailed paramilitaries on two grounds.

The first is that it would be inappropriate in the light of recent events. That presumably means the killing of Billy Wright, the leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), by three members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), and the ensuing revenge-killings carried out by the LVF. The second is that it would be giving in to blackmail.

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Arguably the Government's response is perverse. Aside from jeopardising the three years of ceasefires, the official Governmental position in effect assists the ambitions of those republicans (within the INLA and the Army Continuity Council) and those loyalists (within the LVF) who want to see a return to full-scale ethno-national war. They want to achieve their goal by bringing the larger paramilitary organisations of their respective co-nationals back into armed conflict.

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In short, the Government's approach makes it more likely that a full-scale return to loyalist assassinations will produce a "defensive", ie a murderous response, from the Provisional IRA - just what the INLA would like to see.

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There is a better strategy, and one that is now thinkable, though previously it was taboo. It is privately supported by senior figures in the Irish administration. This strategy would entail the rapid and systematic release on license of all paramilitaries belonging to organisations that are maintaining ceasefires, ie the PRAs, the UVF and the UDA (including the UFF and the Red Hand Commandos).

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Prisoners would be released on two understandings. If they re-offended they would return to serve their existing sentence, plus any new sentence for their most recent offence. And if their organisation broke its ceasefire then they and all their comrades would return to jail.

The political and military thinking behind this strategy is straightforward. It is better to have the prisoners as "hostages" in their communities, with an interest in sustaining the ceasefires, than to have them as combustible materials igniting their more militant colleagues outside the jails.

Their organisations, with exceptions noted, have demonstrated a significant and disciplined commitment to their ceasefires, and it would be sensible to reward them for this conduct rather than to continue to punish them along with those paramilitaries whose organisations have not called for ceasefires.

It is also a strategy for splitting the extremists. It rewards those who engage in electoral politics, have mandates and have organised ceasefires, and punishes those who refuse electoral politics, have no mandates, and wish to fight to the finish.

Lastly, it eases matters at the negotiating tables. The newly responsible republicans and loyalists will have a very decided interest in a political settlement - the continued freedom of their former prisoners.

The obvious and understandable objection to this strategy is that it frees convicted murderers and ignores the feelings of victims. The first point is true; the second need not be. Victims and their relatives have mixed feelings. Many of them would accept such a strategy if it worked, ie if it prevented any further victims, or, indeed, if it significantly reduced the number of future victims.

My argument is that it would work because there would be strong incentives for good behaviour on the part of the released paramilitaries. Work done by the Northern Ireland Care and Resettlement of Offenders organisation demonstrates a very low rate of recidivism amongst former loyalist and republican prisoners, which suggests that this alternative strategy could work.

Lastly, this strategy has one great virtue: it is reversible. If the paramilitaries abuse the trust placed in them then the British state has the capacity to send them back to jail.

Yes, this strategy is risky, but effective conflict-resolution requires leaps in imagination and big confidence-building measures.

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