

Early Release of Prisoners

Press Release - 24th August, 1995

Press Release: Embargo: 7.00 A.M. Thursday 24 August 1995

Attn: NEWSDESK

Subject: Early Release of politically motivated prisoners

"We all need a new start in Ireland and in Britain. We need to move out of the almost overpowering undertow of past evil, endless action and reaction, hostility and resentment that drag us down and threaten to drown us. The paramilitary ceasefires have given us this opportunity".

This statement was made today in a new document: Liberty to Captives? The Release of Politically Motivated Prisoners published by the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics. The Group, which consists of Catholics and Protestants from both North and South, has published eight agreed documents since 1983. In their new publication the Group argue that:

"Part of that new start involves looking at the position of politically motivated prisoners.

Traditionally, there have been two main arguments for prisons. One is punishment. The second is the protection of society. Many prisoners have served very long sentences. Many prisoners have already received considerable punishment for what they have done, and the ceasefires mean that any danger to society in releasing them has been very greatly reduced.

"As a group we therefore believe that politically motivated prisoners must be released early and that we need to act on this issue urgently. It is necessary in order to create a future which will not involve evils like those we have experienced in the past twenty-five years. It must, however, be done in a way which will preserve the seriousness and the moral weight of the offences committed.

"We recognise that very real burdens will be put on the victims. There is no early release for them. For many there can be no adequate compensation, reparation or justice. However, refusing to release prisoners will not solve the problems of victims either. They will still be left with their loss and their pain as they struggle to rebuild their lives.

The following is a list of possible ways to reduce the number of prisoners:

- release all prisoners who have served over twelve years (This would be the equivalent of a twenty-four year
- sentence if there was 50% remission, or an eighteen year sentence with 33% remission);
- release those who have served a considerable number of years and who were very young when they committed their offences;
- increase the remission rate to 50%;

- deal urgently with the issue of the transfer of the remaining prisoners from England to Northern Ireland and the Republic;
- be more flexible on the conditions governing compassionate release.

"If we refuse to make any move on prisoners we are in effect saying that the ceasefires have changed nothing. Can we then say that we are serious about creating the conditions necessary for a lasting peace?"

Copies of the document can be obtained from:

The Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, 7 Upper Crescent, Belfast BT7 1NT, Tel: 225008.

The following are members of the Group:

Rev John Brady, S.J., Lecturer, National College of Industrial Relations, Dublin Rev Leslie Carroll, Presbyterian Minister, Belfast

Mr Jerome Connolly, Executive Secretary, Irish Commission for Justice and Peace Dr John D'Arcy May, Irish School of Ecumenics

Rev Tim Kinahan, Church of Ireland Rector

Rev Brian Lennon, S.J., Jesuit Community Portadown

Rev Alan Martin, Presbyterian Minister, Dublin

Rev John Morrow, Irish School of Ecumenics

Mr Colm O'Doherty, Family Therapist, Dundalk

Mrs Una O'Higgins O'Malley, Glencree Centre

Mrs Janet Quilley, Quaker House, Belfast

Dr David Stevens, Irish Council of Churches

Rev Ken Thompson, Methodist Minister, Greencastle, Northern Ireland

Rev Trevor Williams, Leader, Corrymeela Community, Ballycastle