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The buck stops where exactly?

Andersonstown News

by Robin Livingstone

29/01/2007

I've been thinking about former British Home Secretary Charles Clarke this week. Charles was appointed to the top job in December 2004 after David Blunkett resigned over the 'nanny visa' affair.

It wasn't to be a happy posting for Charles; in fact, he lasted just 17 months. In the torrent of controversies that has issued forth from this Labour government over the years, you may have forgotten just what it was that did for Charles, so let's just go over it.

A month before Charles was kicked out on his well-upholstered behind, it was revealed that just over a thousand foreign nationals convicted of a wide variety of crimes had been released after doing their porridge without being considered for deportation. Well over 200 of those released had gone on to commit further crimes in Britain, ranging from assault and drugs offences, to manslaughter and the sexual abuse of children.

Labour throws open prison gates to grandma-beating, kiddy-fiddling, dope-dealing Johnny Foreigner – you could almost hear the moans of ecstasy emanating from the newsrooms of the Sun and the Daily Mail.

The wolves had to be fed, and so it was that poor Charles was out on his considerable ear before the paint on the sign on his new office was dry. This despite the fact that the failings were not his, but those of his predecessors, and Charles had been guilty of nothing more than trying to clean up the mess left by somebody else.

In the eye of the storm and in a bid to save his job, Charles would have been perfectly entitled to say "Nothing to do with me, mate", but in an almost endearing display of Old Labour morality, he refused to blame or snipe or snivel. "It's a massive issue, and it's true to say we took our eye off the ball. The first priority now is to get the situation under control, and that's what I'm focusing on."

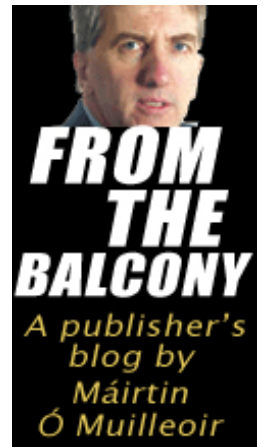
Fat lot of good it did him.

Let's contrast that with the fall-out from the Nuala O'Loan report of last week, which revealed Special Branch's role in the targeting and murder of former associates and innocent Catholics by the Mount Vernon UVF. Ronnie Flanagan, who was RUC Chief Constable at the time when some of the most revolting crimes were being committed by Special Branch, says he didn't know anything about it. Let's take Ronnie at his word and assume that he was in the dark. The question then arises: in the field of crime and punishment, when did ignorance become an excuse? And can it really be a good idea to have as HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary a man who claims to have had no idea of the inner workings of the most powerful department of the constabulary he headed? A department, by the way, which he once

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presided over.

The CEO of a large oil company can end up on the dole and in the dock because a drunken captain on one of his tankers falls asleep in the middle of the night. And rightly so. Nobody argues that the CEO was in the wheelroom or handed out the rum, but he's ultimately responsible nevertheless. The managing director of a railway company might not know a rusty nut from a corroded bolt, but when that train comes off the track he's going to shoulder the blame, not the line manager who refused to authorise the overtime.

I'm not that interested in seeing Ronnie in the dock, but I think at the very least he deserves to be on the dole.

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