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EMPEY CALLS ON WOODWARD TO ISSUE A CLEAR STATEMENT ON POSSIBLE AMNESTY, RECLASSIFICATION AND EXPUNGING OF RECORDS TO PUT PEOPLE'S MINDS AT REST

E-mail to a friend January 11th, 2008 Alex Benjamin



Ulster Unionist Party Leader Sir Reg Empey today wrote an open letter to the Secretary of State urging Mr Woodward to issue a clear statement indicating that there will be no amnesty or expunging of terrorist records and no reclassification of 'the troubles' to 'a war'.

Sir Reg is concerned at the stepping up of ambiguous language used firstly by Commission for the Past and latterly by the Prime Minister this week on the subject. He warned that any moves towards an amnesty, expunging of records or reclassification of 'the troubles' to 'a war' would have far reaching consequences.

In his letter Sir Reg said,

"As Secretary of State, you will be aware that few things are more likely to cause controversy than discussions about the past.

The ideas floated at the first public meeting held by Archbishop Eames and Denis Bradley concerning an amnesty and a redefinition of the 'Troubles' to a 'war' have caused great anxiety and distress to the many families and individuals who have been traumatised as a result of terrorist activity in recent year... Should HM Government be tempted to do some sort of deal with republicans on this issue, perhaps as part of an arrangement to pave the way for the devolution of policing and justice, the consequences would be far reaching...

...The legal, as well as the political consequences of any such move would destabilise our fledgling institutions and divert our attention away from the urgent task of restoring our economy and public services which have been starved of investment due directly to terrorism...

... The Prime Minister was asked in the House of Commons this week to confirm that the Government had no intention of going down this road. Unfortunately he failed to take the opportunity to do so. It may be that there was some agreement reached behind the scenes at St Andrews that links devolution of policing to the reclassification of the Troubles. If there was, or if you intend to consider such a move, then I can only advise you, most sincerely, to reconsider what would be the last straw for many who have reluctantly been prepared to give our present level of devolution a chance to prove itself...

...I would urge you to quickly put people's minds at rest by making a clear statement confirming that the Government has no intention of following this path. Such a move would restore confidence, and allow a mature debate on how we might bring as much relief as possible to those who have suffered greatly in the recent past."

full copy of letter:

Open letter to Shaun Woodward MP

As Secretary of State, you will be aware that few things are more likely to cause controversy than discussions about the past.

The ideas floated at the first public meeting held by Archbishop Eames and Denis Bradley concerning an amnesty and a redefinition of the 'Troubles' to a 'war' have caused great anxiety and distress to the many families and individuals who have been traumatised as a result of terrorist activity in recent years.

I have received very significant reaction to the idea of an amnesty or expunging of records for former terrorists, and similarly, there has been a wave of anger at the idea that what happened between 1969 and the present day was anything other than an insurgency.

You must be aware that the IRA has long sought international justification for its 'war' always keen to portray itself as a legitimate army fighting forces of occupation.

I can assure you that the people my party represents, and I believe many others, are appalled at the prospect of elevating what happened here for nearly 40 years as anything other than what it was – pure terrorism.

Should HM Government be tempted to do some sort of deal with republicans on this issue, perhaps as part of an arrangement to pave the way for the devolution of policing and justice, the consequences would be far reaching.

Most people agree, that if we had been at war, and the rules of war had applied, then far fewer members of the security forces would have been killed and injured, and the campaign waged by both republicans and loyalists would have been crushed in short order. Instead, the police and army had to fight terrorism under civil law, unable to defend themselves as an army would on a conventional battlefield.

The legal, as well as the political consequences of any such move would destabilise our fledgling institutions and divert our attention away from the urgent task of restoring our economy and public services which have been starved of investment due directly to terrorism.

The Prime Minister was asked in the House of Commons this week to confirm that the Government had no intention of going down this road. Unfortunately he failed to take the opportunity to do so. It may be that there was some agreement reached behind the scenes at St Andrews that links devolution of policing to the reclassification of the Troubles. If there was, or if you intend to consider such a move, then I can only advise you, most sincerely, to reconsider what would be the last straw for many who have reluctantly been prepared to give our present level of devolution a chance to prove it.

In conclusion, I would urge you to quickly put people's minds at rest by making a clear statement confirming that the Government has no intention of following this path. Such a move would restore confidence, and allow a mature debate on how we might bring as much relief as possible to those who have suffered greatly in the recent past.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Sir Reg Empey OBE MLA

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**Ulster Unionist Party, Cunningham House, 429 Holywood Road, Belfast BT4 2LN.
Tel: 028 9076 5500 | Fax: 028 9076 9419 | Email: uup@uup.org**