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The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Alliance

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Rice slams McWilliams for not supporting exiles

ALLIANCE Councillor Geraldine Rice has slammed Women's Coalition leader Monica McWilliams for failing to back an Assembly motion calling for the Government's proposed amnesty for terrorists 'on the run' only to proceed if paramilitary exiles can return safely to Northern Ireland.

On Tuesday, the Assembly failed to pass an Alliance motion calling for those forced from Northern Ireland to be allowed home, should the Government proceed with what Cllr Rice described as "an ill-advised general amnesty for terrorists".

Cllr Rice said: "Ms McWilliams contribution to the debate was nonsensical, vitriolic and unhelpful to the victims of paramilitary violence. Most people can see the hypocrisy and unfairness of allowing dangerous fugitives back into the country, while their gun-toting friends continue to force people out of it.

"If an amnesty were conditional upon allowing exiles back, it would bring a great deal of public confidence back to a process where there is a perception that it is tipped in favour of those who put Northern Ireland through 30 years of suffering.

"This is a straightforward human rights issue - and for those parties which claim to stand up for human rights, I would say it is now time to live up to that claim.

"The Government must also bear its share of responsibility for cooking up this ill thought out plan behind closed doors at Weston Park last year without even consulting other parties. Now they intend to bring legislation before the Commons next month - and no-one has had sight of it yet.

"Given the Government's legislative record when it comes to the peace process - policing legislation is also to be changed shortly - it is incredible that Ms McWilliams is prepared to accept the situation unquestioningly, particularly when she stated in her Assembly speech that

the Weston Park proposals 'were derived from a package of measures, with which not everyone was satisfied'.

"While Monica McWilliams shouts empty rhetoric from the sidelines, accepting that exiling will continue, Alliance will continue its fight to bring those forced out by paramilitaries back to Northern Ireland. It is unfortunate that some will not be joining with us on this important human rights issue, but this is an issue which I believe people feel strongly about.

"It is something that cannot be put on the long finger, as Ms McWilliams suggests when she says that exiling 'will continue for some time'. She goes on to say that IRA and loyalist paramilitaries on the run 'must be dealt with one day' - but does she not realise that it is in fact less than a month away before the Government puts forward its amnesty proposals?

"How long does the Women's Coalition suggest that exiles must be prepared to suffer a complete abuse of human rights before they are allowed home? That is hardly the position of a party committed to equality, justice and a non-sectarian future.

"Simply calling for those with influence to use it to end exiling is not enough. Leverage must be exerted where the opportunity exists, otherwise some will continue to exploit the political process. Unfortunately, that opportunity is being passed up.

"While Sinn Fein continues to justify expulsions, tarring all those expelled as criminals, I would like to point out that it is rarely the case that one person is exiled by the paramilitaries. Entire families are broken up, children are forced to change schools, wives and partners are often faced with making a new life for themselves in a country unknown to them.

"Some, such as Derry man Joseph McCloskey, are put out of their home simply for standing up to paramilitaries - something Alliance Deputy Leader Eileen Bell, who proposed the motion - suffered twice. Yet the Women's Coalition would see the Enniskillen bomber back in Northern Ireland tomorrow.

"If we are to truly move forward into a united, stable and peaceful society, it is vital that we establish that human rights are not just for one side or the other, but for every single person in Northern Ireland. If we are to have a just society, it must be justice for all."

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