

Howard under fire over drug baron pardon

Conservatives' leader-in-waiting is asked to explain his decision as Home Secretary to release £18m smuggling pair

by Martin Bright
and Pete Sawyer

THE TORY leader-in-waiting, Michael Howard, was under pressure last night to explain his role in obtaining a royal pardon for two of Britain's most notorious drug barons.

John Haase and Paul Bennett were released in July 1996 when Howard was Home Secretary, after serving just 11 months of their 18-year sentences. Haase is now serving 13 years in jail for money-laundering and supplying guns to Glasgow gangsters and there is a warrant out for Bennett's arrest on drug-smuggling charges.

Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs will this week call for a full inquiry into Howard's decision to release the two men, who ran an £18 million smuggling ring in Liverpool.

Howard, who forged a reputation for being tough on crime while serving in the last Tory government, said shortly after their release that the men had given vital information to Customs investigators, who in turn had recommended to the trial judge that their sentences be reduced.

Howard has always maintained that he only did the judge's bidding. His decision marked a return to the controversial 'supergrass' system, which had largely ended after a series of cases in the Seventies in which informers acted as agents provocateurs.

Haase and Bennett were said to have helped identify arms and drugs caches. But despite their apparent importance as informers, in May 2001 the Treasury Minister, Dawn Primarolo, answering



Michael Howard, top, would not disclose why he had granted a pardon to John Haase, above, saying that the reasons were too sensitive.

a question from the Liverpool Walton MP Peter Kilfoyle, told Parliament that neither man had given evidence in any Customs and Excise prosecutions and that no further investigations were planned.

Howard will also be asked to clarify the role of one of his relatives in the affair. Simon Bakerman, an associate of the Liverpool gangsters, who contacted Haase after his release, is his distant cousin.

Bakerman was jailed for three years in November 2002 for setting up a factory to manufacture amphetamine and ketamine pills.

His father, Warner Bakerman, who still lives in Liverpool, told *The Observer* last week that he had nothing to say about Michael Howard. But his wife Freda has claimed that Howard visited the family for tea when Home Secretary, during visits to watch Liverpool football club.

But it is the Haase and Bennett decision that is likely to cause Howard the most political embarrassment. The pair were arrested in July 1993 after the discovery of 55kg of heroin with a street value of around £18m.

Haase and Bennett ran the 'Turkish Connection', a smuggling network in which heroin was brought from Turkey to Liverpool over four years. Haase and his associates ran parts of the city like a private fiefdom, running protection rackets and clubs.

The two men were convicted in February 1995; their release sparked outrage. Two local MPs, David Alton and George Howarth, raised the matter by letter at the time. In his reply, Howard wrote: 'I can neither reveal, nor overstate the risks which would flow from revealing, any of the details which confidentially had been placed before him [the judge] by the prosecuting authorities, save to say that the information had proved to offer quite enormous and unique assistance to the law enforcement agencies.'

The Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman Mark Oaten said: 'Drug barons are some of the most evil criminals we have in this country. I find it hard to imagine



Simon Bakerman, a distant cousin of Howard's, is an associate of the two drug dealers.
Photograph by Ray Bradbury/News International

what justification there could be for releasing them so early. Mr Howard should explain this remarkable decision.'

Louise Ellman, Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside, said Howard owed Merseyside an explanation: 'Howard professes to be a hardliner and yet he gained a royal pardon for hardened criminals, who returned to serious crime.'

A spokesman for Howard said he had no further comment about Haase and Bennett or Bakerman.

At the time of the release, Howard also used his influence to close down criticism about the case. The Home Office asked news organisations, including *The Observer*, to suppress news of the Haase and Bennett release, which

Howard called Labour MP Peter Kilfoyle, just before he was about to do an interview with Sky News, and asked him not to comment on the matter, as the drugs dealers had provided 'significant information' and exposure would 'imperil their lives'.

Kilfoyle has spent several years building up a dossier on the case. 'There is deep concern that Customs and Excise has been gravely misled by two practised liars - Haase and Bennett. The evidence is there for all to see,' he said during a Commons debate in 2001.

It has been suggested that MI5, operating under the umbrella of the Home Office, recommended the release of Haase and Bennett, who had led MI5 to major players