

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

A Blow Struck for Equality within Internment Camp

By Des O'Hagan

January 22, 1972

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[no 'Letter from Long Kesh' title on the printed article]

There is no precedent, as far as I know, for the type of industrial battle which now seems to be on the cards in Long Kesh: unless, that is, one goes back to the few Glenravel Street police officers who in 1913 struck in sympathy with the Belfast carters. It is unlikely that Mr. Graham Shillington, R.U.C. chief constable, will consider pulling his overworked men out of Palace Barracks in solidarity with the increasingly disgruntled prison officers. Nor do I imagine, if the Irish Congress of Trade Unions decided to black the site, would the British Army refuse to ferry the daily requirements to the camp. Our efforts to encourage the soldiers to organise, education and agitate have alas been received rather coldly. Their failure to understand the need for unionisation is a problem Jack Jones might ponder on in this golden year of the T.G.W.U.

This is not to say that the Irish warders have surrendered without a blow being struck for the honoured maxim of equal pay for equal work.

Part of their strategy, it seems, is to ensure that the most uncomfortable duty – none are onerous, all are boring – goes to the Englishmen. I do not want to sound too gleeful, but their present effort, making the best of frugal resources, is simply magnificent. Each cage exit is by way of two barbed wire gates and as internal security decrees that when one gate is open the other must be closed, one warder is engaged in a space of about nine square yards for nearly three hours at a time.

Undoubtedly the weather has helped, there having been quite a few soft Irish days recently, so that, of the original nine Isle of Wight volunteers, seven have returned to Parkhurst – a respectable decent sort of place apparently. They departed enthusiastic converts to Mr. Maudling's view of this part of Ireland. One can see the tourist board lining up with those calling for Mr. Faulkner's head if the warders maintain their present success rate.

COMMON FEELING

Mr. Faulkner is naturally enough regarded by one and all here with an intense identical emotion. Pollsters, psephologists, designers of questionnaires in general can be certain they would receive a 100% positive response about his responsibility for the present state of the community.

At the same time we follow his increasingly fewer pronouncements closely, his recent interview on television being analysed, reviewed, dissected, studied and discussed from every possible angle. Unanimously, not, I hasten to add solely out of wishful thinking, the verdict was that he is a man on the brink. There is no point relating the catastrophes, natural or otherwise, which our collective genius could immediately provide if the Deity were to command our willing services. Suffice to say that the odds available here – we have our own bookie – would not lead to the placing of a single Woodbine in his favour. Our political experts, graduates *cum laudae* of the Curragh, Parkhurst, Derry, Crumlin, Mountjoy and Dartmoor, have voted him to be a "baten docket." As local racing men know, this refers to a losing bet: in Belfast clerks write each forecast for the punter, a touch of pre-bureaucratic warmth missing, I understand, from Southern betting shops. There are more serious matters dividing us than the modish two-nations theory would have it. Anyhow there is a finality in the expression, an epigrammatic quality worthy of his last days at Stormont.

Clearly a single television performance would not provide all the evidence necessary for such dogmatism, yet even Mr. Faulkner's most ardent admirers, who may see in him something of the late President Kennedy or Pierre Trudeau, could not but fail to be concerned by his appearance. Normally his facial expression is not one to inspire trust or confidence and it is regrettable that the question, "would you buy a secondhand car from this man," was employed so accurately elsewhere. But on this

occasion, Portadown matrons, had they read "The Naked Lunch" would have been convinced they were witnessing a junkie still suffering from a cold turkey cure for the habit. His worries certainly are legion: one doubts very much if even the kindly Captain O'Neill could have done his Churchillian thing at this time.

SUBTLE SIGNS

Our experts here, though, having more time than most to spend over the available entrails have been posing stimulating questions with regard to this particular programme. To be sure, Stormont does not provide much of an audience these days; but why exactly did Mr. Faulkner, clearly somewhat uneasy – even shifty – expose himself to what was for Irish television a uniquely rigorous interview? There was also an interesting fumbling intent to disclaim responsibility for the continuation of internment. That the programme went out from Havelock House, for some simply reflects Mr. Faulkner's pique with the other channels: there are others among us who in hunting for an eager pretender see in Mr. Bradford's B.B.C. broadcast a subtle sign of willingness to wield the axe or administer the stab in the kidneys. Did his ultimate, apparently reluctant, admission that internment had resulted in massive alienation and polarisation within the community indicate a readiness to shoulder the cares of even an emasculated office and thus force Mr. Faulkner to plead for viewing time to tell once again about his repugnance for Long Kesh, the Maidstone, Magilligan and ...

There is a particularly nasty story circulating here that when the Prime Minister's office rang Ulster Television to hastily arrange the details they were told by the programme director that the performer's fee would be the usual 25 guineas. Mr. Faulkner's cheque, it is said, was on his desk the following morning.

I am sure that this is not original but it does convey the general opinion of Mr. Faulkner.

You may be thinking that our time would be better spent on education, learning bridge or playing chess, than reading political teacups and there are a few who would probably agree with you. In fact, as someone put it only the other night, wading between the Nissan huts, "we're only political pawns in the game:" and on reflection there is a wealth of political understanding in that comment.

[This letter is part of a series of 21 which appeared in The Irish Times between 15 January 1972 and 1 July 1972. Permission for the text from the letters to be archived by CAIN was provided by the current copyright holder Dónal O'Hagan. The full set of letters, plus background information can be found at: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/des_ohagan/]

A BLOW STRUCK FOR EQUALITY WITHIN INTERNMENT CAMP

By Des O'Hagan

THERE IS NO PRECEDENT, as far as I know, for the type of industrial battle which now seems to be definitely on the cards in Long Kesh: unless, that is, one goes back to the few Glenravel street police officers who in 1913 struck in sympathy with the Belfast carters. It is unlikely that Mr. Graham Shillington, R.U.C. Chief Constable, will consider pulling his overworked men out of Holywood Barracks in solidarity with the increasingly disgruntled prison officers. Nor do I imagine, if the Irish Congress of Trade Unions decided to black the site, would the British Army refuse to ferry the daily requirements to the camp. Our efforts to encourage the soldiers to organise, education and agitate have also been received rather coldly. Their failure to understand the need for unionisation is a problem Jack Jones might ponder on in this golden jubilee year of the T.G.W.U.

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