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Reference ..... PI 313/85 .....

Mr Jackson

## USE OF IRISH IN PRISONS

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Over the past few weeks we have been looking closely at the whole question of the use of Irish in prisons as we thought it timely to take stock of our current policy and reflect on how it was evolving particularly as it is an area which is continuing to attract attention.
- 1.2 At the beginning of August we circulated a paper within the office reviewing our policy and at the same time airing some proposals and recommendations which we felt could strengthen our position. We asked copy recipients to comment on the paper and these have now been received. This paper now pulls together those views and develops some of the suggestions previously put forward.
- 1.3 We feel that Governors should have the opportunity to consider these proposals in some detail so that we can move forward with not only a clear but a defensible policy.

### 2.0 Present Policy

- 2.1 In responding to a leading article in a local daily newspaper that criticised the Department's restrictions on the use of Irish in prisons, the Minister went on record as saying that the restrictions which exist are for practical and security reasons only and not intended to suppress any aspect of a prisoner's legitimate national identity. This statement, which in practice forms the basis of our present policy, was released in March of last year, <sup>and</sup> at that time the Minister gave certain assurances that he would both keep the situation under close review and continue to examine ways of making progress. In May of this year the Minister again went public on the subject stating that there was no evidence of repression of the Irish language in prisons and only books that were "blatantly subversive" were withheld from prisoners.
- 2.2 It is evident from these and other statements made by the Minister that he favours doing all that we can to blunt any criticism on the "Irish identity" issue and that perhaps our policy in this area could do more to reflect this.

### 3.0 Background

- 3.1 The "Irish identity" is not new to our prisons. It was with us in the early 70s when certain Republican prisoners saw the use of Irish as a fundamental right. It was again very much in evidence during the hunger strike and dirty protest days in Maze, but since 1981 it has been simmering just under the surface. Prisoners, it must be said, are not waging a major campaign but rather what we have is an on-going protest by a small but sometimes vociferous group of prisoners located mainly at Maze (Cellular) Prison. Over recent months we have witnessed how these prisoners can carefully orchestrate a campaign, both inside and outside the prison, to have Irish elevated and recognised as an official language within the prison system. We have also witnessed the efforts of those sympathetic to the prisoners' campaign, skilfully manipulating the situation to demonstrate that it is not only the Prison Department that seeks to suppress the prisoners' "legitimate rights", but it is the British Government's overall objective to repress all shades of Irish Nationalism and culture in

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Northern Ireland. Evidence of this came to light towards the end of 1984 when the Roddy McCorley Society (an organisation with close ties with Provisional Sinn Féin) ran a full page advertisement in the Irish News in which they alleged that Irish language users were being discriminated against in Northern Ireland and that the language itself was being suppressed. The article also challenged the Government's no Irish in prisons policy and called on nationalists to put pressure on the British Government to allow prisoners to have the unrestricted use of Irish.

- 3.2 The Celtic League and more recently the West Belfast Committee of Glor na nGael wrote to the Minister at length on a wide range of "Irish" subjects but in the main they focused on the promotion of the Irish language in prisons. Lord Hylton has also taken up the subject from time to time and we are aware that the Roddy McCorley Society have lodged a complaint with the United Nations on the suppression of Irish in prisons in Northern Ireland.
- 3.3 Against this back-cloth of criticism we have relied heavily on the Minister's public statement of March 1984 and it has been our consistent policy that because of the practical difficulty - the absence of sufficient numbers of prison staff fluent in Irish to undertake censorship duties - which alone prevented us from making any changes. We could continue to hold this line but it is our view that this is an area where we can successfully take the initiative and undermine much of the criticism of this growing campaign.
- 3.4 It will be unfortunate that any movement we make will be seen by some as responding to Republican pressure and viewed by others as not moving far enough. We are however of the opinion that some limited changes in policy can be made and over the past few months we have demonstrated by the library book initiative at Maze (Cellular) how this can be achieved. In every area we are cautious about how far we can go without taking unwarranted risks with the security of our prisons and in certain areas we conclude that we should adhere to the status quo. All these areas are now considered in turn.
- 4.0 Publications in Irish - Books, Magazines, Newspapers, etc.
- 4.1 The restrictions on books etc in Irish is possibly the biggest single area that causes most controversy. In the past the practical difficulties of not having staff available to undertake censorship duties prevented us from allowing prisoners to have any books in Irish. However, with a view to getting round this difficulty, we introduced to the Maze Cellular library a small number of foreign language books, including some in Irish, and prisoners now have access to these. Over the coming months we intend building the stock of books in Irish up to around 100 and once this has been achieved some of the steam will be taken out of our critics' argument that we are out to repress the Irish language.
- 4.2 Censorship difficulties extend, of course, to magazines and newspapers and they present us with a continuing problem. There are now an increasing number of quarterly/monthly magazines, weekly and daily newspapers in the Irish language and prisoners frequently petition to have access to them. We have reviewed a few of these publications and found out that they are either community or culturally orientated publications. It is our view that there is no sound reason for refusing such publications - but we are faced with the practical problem of vetting.
- 4.3 To expect our Education Department or our Chaplains to undertake this task

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on a regular basis would not only be unfair but would undoubtedly place teaching staff under considerable pressure. To overcome this vetting problem we have discovered that from within the NIO we have a number of people fluent in Irish and it has been suggested that we should call on this expertise to undertake the necessary censorship duties. Ideally, one of these officers would be transferred to Prison Regimes Division and under supervision advise Headquarters and establishments on the suitability of reading material in Irish. If this facility was available and it does have some support within Headquarters, we would quietly accept books sent in by prisoners' relatives and friends and these will be sent to the Department for vetting. Such a move we feel would kill off one of the current criticisms that books in Irish are refused that are already freely circulating in the prison via the prison library. Our position as it stands at present is difficult to defend.

4.4 An alternative suggestion has been put forward that we should compile a list of titles of suitable books, magazines etc in Irish and provided such books comply with other administrative and security requirements viz that they are soft-backed and in good condition etc these would be acceptable. Either way it is felt that our policy in this area should reflect the fact that we have no desire to place unnecessary restrictions in the way of prisoners who wish to read material in Irish.

4.5 In the longer term we are aiming to provide in-service training in Irish for Prison (Censor) staff and it is hoped that this could further widen the scope of Irish material being allowed in to prisoners. The advantages of having a sprinkling of Irish speakers throughout the Service would obviously be considerable - and not only from a censorship point of view.

#### 5.0 Prisoners' letters in Irish

5.1 There is little doubt that if we decide to relax our restrictions on reading material in Irish, the emphasis of the prisoners' campaign will switch to private correspondence. This would present us with a different problem and one which could not be remedied by a Headquarters resource. It is well known that in one establishment alone (Maze Cellular) we have upwards of 300 prisoners who would wish to write some private letters in Irish.

5.2 We have no doubt that this will remain the target of the reformers and the less well-disposed. To combat this it has been suggested that if we could identify a small number of Irish speakers in each establishment we could restrict prisoners to one letter in Irish each week/month - whatever was manageable. We are well aware that the Prison Service is not completely bereft of Irish speakers but in the absence of sufficient numbers we feel that on security grounds alone we must maintain the present line and refuse to accept prisoners' letters in Irish. This is in compliance with Standing Orders (5B No 26) which state that prisoners will correspond in English unless they are unable to do so. We are satisfied that all our prisoners can correspond in English.

#### 6.0 LP Records Containing Songs in Irish

6.1 Our present policy of refusing LP records that contain songs in a foreign language (mainly Irish) is in our view indefensible. It is difficult to argue that songs by national and international artists who make recordings in their national tongue should be banned. Having said that

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we do of course recognise that less reputable "artists" release records in Irish consequently all LPs in Irish are prohibited.

- 6.2 In a recent case on this particular issue the Director of Operations suggested that the Department should acquire a "censoring resource" for Irish language matters and this suggestion independently ties in with our recommendation at paragraph 4.3 above which, if accepted, would resolve the difficulty in censoring LP records.

#### 7.0 Irish Language Classes

- 7.1 Since the escape from Maze we have not been in a position to provide classes in Irish at that establishment. This predictably has given rise to criticism but from the beginning of the next academic year (September 1985) we propose to introduce into Maze (Cellular) a pilot '0' Level Irish Language Course for a group of approximately 30 prisoners. For security reasons the course will be by the distance-learning method of study involving prisoners in the use of tape-recording equipment. Prisoners have naturally received advance notice of this and they have made it quite clear that they are not content with the proposed arrangements. The fact remains we have re-introduced Irish language classes into Maze (Cellular). We will be monitoring developments closely.

#### 8.0 Visits - Conversing in Irish

- 8.1 Standing Order 5A No 28(c) states that prisoners and visitors will converse in English unless they are unable to do so. For very obvious security reasons our policy should remain unchanged.

#### 9.0 Sport - Gaelic Football

- 9.1 The question of providing facilities for playing Gaelic games has been raised with us from time to time and we have been accused of discriminating against a particular group of prisoners.
- 9.2 Our public position has been that there are difficulties in making facilities available for a variety of outdoor sports and as soccer is a game in which most prisoners can participate that is what the Authorities provide. In-house we recognise that to convert a soccer pitch in order to provide a Gaelic pitch at say Maze Cellular or Magilligan, which would be used solely by Republican prisoners, would in fact be condoning segregation. This we were not prepared to do.
- 9.3 There is however a school of thought within the office that our position on Gaelic football is vulnerable. It has been said that it will be hard to sustain our argument that Gaelic football is conducive to segregation when outside the prison environment the Government is according it recognition and on occasions positive assistance. Our public position has also been under attack in that it has been pointed out to us - and we have confirmed - that it is possible to have sports pitches marked out for more than one game and to have dual purpose goalposts.
- 9.4 Clearly our policy must be defensible and with our present stance under such criticism is there room for manoeuvre or should our policy remain unchanged?

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10.0 The Wearing of Emblems (the Fainne)

10.1 Prisoners and pressure groups frequently ask that we relax our ban on the wearing of the Fainne - the emblem awarded to proficient Gaelic speakers. While we accept that our refusal to allow prisoners to wear this simple badge would, on the surface appear to be petty, we are obliged to maintain the prohibition on the wearing of any form of badge or emblem. This must continue to be our policy as the paramilitary factions would be quick to seize on any relaxation and seek to introduce their particular emblem to their prisoners.

11.0 Changing of names to the Irish form

11.1 In response to prisoners who have petitioned to be permitted to change their name back to the Irish form by Deed-Poll we have stated that as English is the language in which official business is conducted there would be practical problems in granting such requests.

11.2 In view of the practical difficulties it is recommended that no change be made to our policy. However, where a prisoner first enters prison and is habitually known by an Irish form of name viz that shown on his committal warrant the Prison Authorities should not require him to revert to the English form. In at least one establishment certain prisoners now choose to sign for their parcels etc and sign petitions "in Irish" and as the signatures are identifiable to the Prison Authorities this is acceptable.

12.0 Summary

12.1 In this paper we have not disguised the fact that the "Irish In Prisons" issue is awkward; nevertheless, it is an issue that we should not ignore. In some areas we have suggested no change to our policy but in other areas we cautiously recommend change and the suggestion at paragraph 4.3 and 6.2 above to acquire a "censoring resource" at Headquarters, if considered appropriate, would be a significant step forward and should remove much of the criticism currently levelled at the Prison Department.

12.2 In all our deliberations we have carefully considered the security implications and we are confident that the proposals put forward are both practicable and sensible. We hope we have struck the right balance.

*E. J. Gallagher*

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Prison Regimes Division

29 August 1985

PS The views of Security and Operations Division are attached at Annex A.

cc Mr Palmer  
Mr McNeill  
Mr Kendrick  
Mr Ginn  
All Governors

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