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Your reference

Our reference PI 313/85

Date 6 September 1985

Dear Mr Bengier

USE OF IRISH IN GB PRISONS

I have read with interest an article in the Republican News of 22 August in which a prisoner in Gartree Prison was allowed to correspond in Irish. (Copy article enclosed).

The use of the Irish language by certain prisoners here in Northern Ireland is currently very topical and there is a resurgence of interest in the language particularly in prisons. Our policy here is that with a view to ensuring the good order and discipline of our prisons, prisoners are not permitted to correspond in Irish or to ^{con}verse in it at visits - all prisoners can of course speak English. These restrictions we feel are necessary on practical and security grounds as we do not have sufficient staff fluent in Irish to undertake the necessary censorship duties. Perhaps I should mention that 75% of our prison population comprise of persons convicted of terrorist crime, some very serious, and to allow terrorists to communicate in any language that cannot be adequately censored would seriously jeopardise the security of our prisons.

I do, of course, recognise that your Standing Orders differ significantly from ours in that your S05B41 states that "inmates may write their letters in the language of their choice, but letters not written in English may be subject to delay". We have no such provision as our corresponding Order reads "prisoners ~~will~~ correspond in English unless they are unable to do so. Letters not written in English may be subject to delay". I fully appreciate the reason for the difference in our respective Orders as mainland prisons no doubt have many foreign nationals and many Welsh speaking prisoners.

Returning, however, to the use of Irish by this named prisoner in Gartree, I would be very interested to learn how the prisons administration resolved the practical difficulty of censorship and also if the practice of prisoners communicating in Irish is more widespread. Presumably prisoners would not be permitted to converse in Irish at visits.

I Need hardly say that this is an unwelcome development insofar as we are concerned particularly if we continue (as we feel we must) to hold the line on prisoners communicating only in English. It is our fear that Sinn Fein who appear to have hijacked the Irish language movement will point to practices in GB prisons and demand similar privileges for NI prisoners.



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I am sorry to have to add to your busy workload/^{but}this particular article has created a great deal of interest within the Office.

Yours sincerely

E. J. Gallagher

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Prison Regimes Division

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