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23/10/85
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Your reference
PI 313/85
Our reference

Date
18 October 1985

Dear Edwin

USE OF IRISH IN GB PRISONS

I am sorry for the delay in replying to your letter of 6 September in which you asked about our policy towards the use of Irish by prisoners.

As you noted, our Standing Orders provide that inmates may write their letters in the language of their choice although letters not written in English may be subject to delay. In the case of Category A prisoners our practice is for the prison concerned to send a copy of any letter not written in English to the translations section of our Immigration and Nationality Department which will arrange for a translated version of the letter to be returned to the prison for censorship. There is thus no additional threat to security but the process can take some weeks. As you noted, we have a number of prisoners (and outside correspondents) who are not able to speak English and there is therefore no prospect of modifying our Standing Order.

As far as visits are concerned Standing Orders specifically provide that inmates and their visitors may speak in the language of their choice even though the supervising officer may not understand the language being spoken. Given that most domestic visits do not take place in circumstances where supervising officers are able to overhear the conversations in practice we are no worse off.

However, we do have an arrangement whereby certain selected Category A prisoners, including the vast majority of terrorists, are subject to high risk visits which involve close supervision by two officers who are required to listen to all that is said. At present, there is no requirement that conversations at these visits be conducted in English and it is left to the discretion of Governors as to whether they employ translators. Our intention is to amend the procedures so that in future conversations can be conducted in languages other than English only where it is clear that either the prisoner or his visitor cannot speak English fluently; this would of course take care of your concern about IRA prisoners learning and then using Gaelic. As far as I know however, very few IRA prisoners are able to converse in Gaelic; the problem has centred more round Middle Eastern and Asian prisoners.

Because we have to deal with a polyglot population it will not be possible to impose the sort of restrictions which you impose on your prisoners. Provided however that my proposed modification to Standing Orders finds favour we should be able to counter any sudden increase in the use of Gaelic at visits. Overall, I would have thought that given the very differing natures of our respective

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prison populations our two lines on this subject can be reconciled without any serious difficulty.

Yours

Nigel Benger

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