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Northern Ireland Office
DUNDONALD HOUSE

PS/MR SCOTT (B&L)

IRISH IN PRISONS

Over the last few months we have, as the Minister knows, been reviewing our approach to the "Irish in prisons" issue. We have consulted Governors and other interests within the office; the purpose of this submission is to inform the Minister of the conclusions which we have reached.

Library books in Irish

2. Irish textbooks are available in the prisons for education purposes, but at present only the prison library at Maze (Cellular) provides non-educational books in Irish. These are few in number, and are in considerable demand. We are taking steps to build up the stock of these books to 100 or so, and in the longer term it may be appropriate to increase the stock still further if there remains an unsatisfied demand. We propose that all other prison libraries should have a selection of Irish books.

Books, newspapers, magazines and records in the Irish language

3. At present we do not allow prisoners to have any of these items sent in. This policy is becoming under increasing attack and is difficult to defend in the light of Government assurances about recognition of "the two traditions". Having consulted Governors we propose to change course and allow books, newspapers, magazines and records in Irish if we can obtain the services in the Prison Department of a suitable civil servant (perhaps of Executive Officer rank) sufficiently knowledgeable to enable him or her to check incoming items in the same way that those in English are examined before being admitted. It may be that at some point in time, as a result of the classes now being conducted for prison staff, it will

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be possible for the checking of incoming items to be done at establishments.

The study of the Irish language in prison

4. While study of the Irish language has continued in the other prisons, the Minister will know that following the Maze escape all evening classes were suspended. Since that time a large number of prisoners in Maze (Cellular) have, with the support of outside groups, been pressing for the recommencement of the Irish classes. The problem as regards other classes was solved by the introduction of flexi-study classes using material bought in from educational suppliers, but the teaching of the Irish language presented a special problem since no suitable flexi-study material was available from suppliers. However the Chief Education Officer and his staff have developed our own "O" level flexi-study package; the Irish teaching inspector in DENI has seen the first units in the package and is impressed. The course commenced on 23 September, initially limited to 30 prisoners, including a small number of Loyalist inmates who had expressed interest.

5. We shall keep the present course, and the possibility of developing it and making it more widely available, under review.

Study of the Irish language by prison staff

6. The Minister is already aware that some 20 prison officers and governing grades at Maze (Cellular) are currently undertaking a pilot course in the Irish language. This will last 15 weeks; the course consists of two 2 hour classes each week. It is not, of course, to be expected that these officers will be anything like fluent in the language at the end of the course, but they may be helped to understand the shouted communications of the Republican prisoners, and their appetites may be whetted for further study.

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Provision of Gaelic football

7. The provision of Gaelic football in prison has been fully explored during the review. Special category prisoners at Maze (Compound) do play Gaelic football on a pitch provided with the appropriate posts. Soccer is also played on the same pitch. There has not been much pressure at Maze (Cellular) or Magilligan for facilities to play Gaelic; the general view of the Prison Department is that we should not attempt to take this issue forward at the present time. We fear that to do so might rekindle the segregation issue at Magilligan, and that there might also be a divisive effect on the mixed wings at Maze (Cellular).

Other Irish language issues

8. Our review has also explored other Irish language issues which are raised from time to time by prisoners and their supporters outside. In all the following areas we feel obliged to recommend that for security and practical operational reasons there should be no change at present in our policy:-

- (a) Conversations in Irish between prisoners and their visitors.
- (b) Prisoners sending or receiving letters in Irish.
- (c) Prisoners using the Irish form of their names.
- (d) The wearing of emblems, including the fainne.

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Summary

9. If the Minister is content, we will proceed as proposed. He may wish to discuss.

S C JACKSON

October 1985

cc Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Mr Palmer
Mr Innes
Mr Gilliland
Mr Merifield
Mr Chesterton
Mr Ferneyhough
Mr Carvill
Mr Kendrick
Mr D McNeill
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