



FROM: J M STEELE
PRISON DEPARTMENT
5 JUNE 1990

cc PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Sir Kenneth Bloomfield - B
Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Burns - B
Mr J McConnell - B
Mr Blackwell - B
Mr McMullan o/r
Mr Maccabe
Mr Cornick
Mr Stanley

M. J. Sullivan
Mr. Corbett

PS/MINISTER OF STATE (B&L) - B

IRISH CULTURAL MATTERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND PRISONS

The Minister of State will be aware of continuing interest in the handling of Irish cultural matters in Northern Ireland prisons. The purpose of this submission is to outline the present position and planned developments.

Background

2. Controversy about Irish cultural matters is, of course, not new. It was with us in the early 1970's and it was again prominent during the dirty protest and hunger strike in the late 1970s and early 1980s. More recently it has fallen from prominence although skillful manipulation by a few prisoners has kept it simmering just below the surface. Currently the main complaints come from a few Republican segregated prisoners in the Maze prison, most notably Eugene McCormick and John Pickering.



3. Pickering and McCormick took the Department to court, alleging that our policy and practice in relation to Irish cultural matters was discriminatory under the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. The matter was heard on 26 June 1989 but dismissed on the ground that the plaintiffs had failed to establish their case. The plaintiffs have appealed the decision and this is likely to be heard in the Autumn. In addition another pair of prisoners in the Maze prison, Gerard Hodgins and Matthew Lundy, sought compensation for the removal of bibles printed in Irish from their cells for a 12 week period in 1985 and complained that they had been discriminated against because of their religious and political views. This case was heard on 13 November 1987 and although £50 compensation was awarded for the loss of access to the bibles the discrimination aspects of the case were dismissed on the same grounds as Pickering and McCormick. Hodgins and Lundy have also appealed but no date has been set for the hearing.

Irish Language and Literature

4. Irish language and literature are provided for in Northern Ireland prisons. There is at least one part-time teacher of Irish in each establishment and in the Maze there is one part-time and one full-time teacher. A selection of library books and textbooks in Irish is provided in every establishment; for example, at the Maze prison over 250 such volumes along with 20 Irish language tapes available to



prisoners. Moreover, there is no ban on books and magazines in Irish being sent to prisoners. However, it is not practicable for any publication to be allowed in without some consideration being given to the suitability of its contents. Irish literature is subject only to the normal checks which apply to all incoming material, although our translation resources are limited and delays can sometimes be considerable.

5. Irish language courses are available in each prison and are well supported. There are, however, resource limitations on all educational courses insofar as there is a finite number of teachers available and a practicable working ceiling.

Correspondence and Visits

6. Northern Ireland Prison Rules require censorship of correspondence as a matter of security. All prisoners who are able to write in English are obliged to do so because of the limited translation resources, although a short greeting in Irish at the beginning or end of each letter is allowed.

7. Prison Rules also require visits to be within sight and hearing of prison staff. Because of the unavailability of staff fluent in Irish, prisoners who speak English as their first language are required to use English during visits. Only



those prisoners who are not capable of speaking English are permitted to communicate in another language. Prisoners are however permitted to converse amongst themselves at other times in Irish or any other language they might wish.

The Fainne

8. It has recently been decided to allow the wearing of the Fainne (the emblem to denote proficiency in the Irish language) as part of a move to recognise a number of academic achievements by prisoners. We are looking at a practicable system for the certification of all such awards.

Irish Name Forms

9. It is essential that prison records are maintained on the same basis as those of the courts and the police. It has therefore been our invariable practice during a prisoner's sentence to use the name by which he was described on the original committal warrant. Nevertheless prison records will include a note of any other name form a prisoner may use.

10. Incoming letters addressed in Irish or using Irish name forms are accepted and delivered provided the name, in whatever form, is clearly identifiable. Prisoners may sign petitions using Irish name forms, but must also include the form used on the committal warrant. Outgoing mail may bear any name and address.



Gaelic Sport

11. Gaelic football as such is not banned in Northern Ireland prisons; it is simply that it is not provided for officially. It was decided some years ago that the statutory one hour daily exercise period should be augmented and that amongst other things in-door and out-door team games should be organised. It was clearly important to provide games which would not pose a threat to security, had rules which could be understood easily by prisoners, would not exclude any section of the inmate population and for which PT Instructors could reasonably obtain supervisory qualifications. For these reasons Association Football was chosen and has been played ever since by most prisoners. If, however, prisoners want to kick a ball around in a Gaelic fashion during their normal exercise periods, no restriction would be placed on them. Unfortunately, one of the main obstacles to the consideration of Gaelic football as an official game for prisoners has been the reluctance of the Gaelic Athletic Association to help in any way.

Musical Instruments

12. Prisoners are allowed to have musical instruments for personal use provided that they are acceptable on security grounds. Prisoners have a range of instruments including those with Irish cultural associations, for example the bodhran and the tin whistle.



Conclusion

13. I think we have done quite well in our handling of Irish cultural matters in prisons during the last few years; any limitations which are imposed are confined to those which are essential for practical or security reasons. There is no question of the legitimate cultural aspirations of any prisoner being deliberately suppressed: on the contrary we are keen to help prisoners develop their talents by taking full advantage of the opportunities offered to them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'J' and 'M' followed by a dot.

J M STEELE