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Reference

Mr Palmer ←

IRISH STUDIES BY PRISONERS IN HMP MAZE (CELLULAR)

1. Mr McNeill has prepared a paper setting out the position in connection with Irish studies by Officers. The following note is intended to complement it by explaining the position in connection with studies by prisoners.

2. Background

There is nothing new in the teaching of Irish language in Northern Ireland prisons. Last year it was, without any problem, ongoing in Belfast, Maze (Compound), Magilligan and Armagh Prisons. However, since the escape from Maze (Cellular) in September 1983, we have been unable to provide Irish language teaching in that establishment for 2 reasons:-

- a. Difficulty in providing enough staff for the escorting of teachers.
- b. Increased prisoner movement from Block to Block on the grounds of security. This breaks up any classroom development in practically everything the Education Department try to do.

3. We solved the above problems in relation to other educational subjects by the introduction and development of flexi-study distance learning. (This is a type of correspondence course with tutorials and marked assignments by our own teachers but relies on material bought from educational suppliers). Irish language, however, presents particularly difficult problems where classroom attendance is not possible. Commercially there is no real market for such flexi-study material and anything that has been produced is either unsuitable or shallow in content. Nothing approaches 'O' Level standard. Therefore ^{while} we could easily buy off the shelf flexi packages in relation to Maths, Geography, etc, we could find nothing suitable in relation to Irish language. The second problem is one of teaching languages by flexi-study, in a prison, with the need for tapes and tape playing machines. Obviously these can have security drawbacks.

4. An added problem was that if we failed to do something quickly and effectively this would carry a high risk as Republican propoganda would portray such failure as clear evidence of NIO cultural repression. The pressure was also intensified by requests from hundreds of prisoners in the Maze for Irish language tuition.

5. Interwoven into our difficulties was the possible reaction of officers and Loyalist prisoners and politicians, who might be opposed to new developments in the teaching of Irish in prison.

6. Progress

Due to the very considerable efforts of Jim Strain, we have by our own initiative partially developed our own 'O' Level Irish flexi-study package. We set up working parties, employed an outside expert on the language to assist and to develop a course along flexi-study lines and worked out the structure of the course in some detail with him. It is not fully complete because it is a time-consuming job, but

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we now have enough 'O' Level material to enable tuition to start this month. Further material is being prepared and we plan to be always about 4 months ahead of the students. When the first units of the course were ready we submitted them to the Irish Teaching Inspector in the Department of Education, for comments. His reaction was very favourable indeed. He feels we are well on the way to providing a highly creditable flexi-study Irish 'O' Level course.

7. We have recruited a full-time teacher. He is qualified to teach a number of subjects including remedial education and Irish and he will divide his time between these two. He has already worked for us in a part-time capacity and we have been impressed by his enthusiasm and professionalism. (He will also be involved in the Officers' class in Irish on 2 evenings per week).

8. Volume

Obviously we could not start a new and untried course, which will necessarily be a pilot scheme for the first year, with the enrolment of over 200 students. We need to see how it goes and iron out any difficulties over the first year. We felt that 30 or so students would be the maximum number we could handle at the start and, therefore, had the difficult task of reducing the applicants to 30. Obviously some defensible criteria had to be drawn up and we settled on the following:-

- a. Applicants who already had an 'O' Level of grade C or above in Irish language, would be asked to await our development of an 'A' Level flexi-study course.
- b. Applicants with a release date before they could take the full 2-year flexi-study Irish course, would not be given a high priority.
- c. Applicants with no release date, or with one after 1990, would have another opportunity and therefore would be asked to apply again next year.
- d. Applicants already benefiting from our agreed maximum educational provision (ie up to 3 'O' Level courses or up to 2 'A' Level courses or one full credit Open University course) could not also enrol.

9. Republican Reaction

Clearly we may receive some complaints from prisoners who have not found a place on the pilot study this year. All we can do is to explain that we need to start in a fairly modest way with the pilot scheme, that we are embarking on a completely untried and unvalidated educational course, and that we intend further development later. I think the criteria mentioned above are reasonable, can be quoted, and defended. After all we have made very considerable efforts to get this pilot course going in difficult circumstances and we should not be reticent about saying so.

10. Loyalist Reaction

When the Loyalist prisoners in Maze heard of our intentions, their response was to ask for a number of places on the Irish course. Whether this came from a desire to have anything that was going for the other side, whether the aim was to take up as many places as possible and thereby deprive some Republican applicants, or whether it stemmed from a real wish to learn Irish, we can only guess. The position is, however, that out of a total of 30 places on the new course, 5 have been offered to Loyalists who have applied and who meet the criteria outlined above.

11. POA Reaction

Mr McNeill has commented more fully on this, but the fact that we are planning an Officers' course in tandem with the prisoners' course seems to have been welcomed by the POA and may lead to easier acceptance by staff of the new course for inmates.

12. Loyalist Politicians' Reaction

Given that we have taught Irish for some years in the Northern Ireland prisons and that some Loyalist prisoners have been given the opportunity to participate in this new course, there may only be muted reaction. Indeed, I think it is particularly helpful that the Loyalist prisoners have at this stage shown an interest. Moreover, Irish is being provided as part of an expanded 'O' Level distance learning programme including Art, Economics and Sociology. We are therefore not just going to town on Irish. We can make this point strongly.

13. Timetable

Next week the teacher will meet the 30 students and explain the course, its requirements and the commitment he expects from them. In turn, students will be asked to enrol formally. The following week the first set of learning packages will be issued. The teacher will then conduct tutorials, mark and return specific assignments set out in the flexi packs. Tapes will be available, but at this stage we do not envisage the need for individual play-back machines in cells. Instead, we anticipate having a group of prisoners studying Irish listening to a tape collectively in the wing classroom via individual headphones.

14. Ministerial Interest

In view of the interest expressed by the Minister, you may wish to copy this to his PS.

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13 September 1985

cc Mr Jackson Mr Strain
 Mr McNeill Mr Brown
 Mr Kendrick Mr Cornick