

## LETTER FROM LONG KESH

### Widgery: Shock to Believers in Fair Play By Des O'Hagan

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There are times when I am almost totally inclined to the view that the English do not really believe in justice, honour, decency, the principles of democracy, fair play and the other virtues which they know too well are unfortunately absent in most, if not all, foreigners. Widgery is an example which must sadly confuse everyone who retains any affection for British standards of justice. In fact it is nearly impossible to accept that a distinguished, senior judge wrote the report and arrived at the conclusions he did in the light of the evidence presented.

Personally, I was educated to respect the empirical tradition. I was convinced that in general it permeated all the British social and political institutions: this led me to the undignified corollary that the Irish were emotional, partisan, subjective, well-nigh incapable of arriving at a reasonable judgment. I may have been singularly naive here, but there are many in exalted political positions who are uncomfortably close to this position.

The shock of Widgery, I think, should have brought home to us not only the foolishness trusting in national stereotypes but also the need to review Anglo-Irish relationships from an entirely different perspective. Last week some of us began this difficult exercise starting with the present "spontaneous" demands for peace, honestly trying to relate them to the Heath initiative.

One member of our group stated that he was reminded at this time of a comment by his mother during a radio broadcast of the Rinty Monaghan-Jackie Patterson world title fight. The bout was interrupted by the announcer apologising for a short break in transmission due to technical problems. Reporting from the King's Hall, Belfast would be resumed as soon as possible.

The good woman not being too well informed of the nature of such broadcasts proclaimed warmly that she was sure that the two fellas would be glad of the break, God help them. This is just about how the present situation seems to us now.

### DESIRE FOR PEACE

I doubt very much if there is one man in Long Kesh who does not genuinely desire peace. The cynical may interject that this is a belated conversion, a baptism to be welcomed as long as the converts are not allowed to preach their gospel. One cannot possibly convince anyone holding such a view, as in all probability they believe that the violence done to internees was justified: if internment camps are necessary to prevent desirable social change then by all means have them. Anyhow our commitment to peace is not simplistic. I have been surprised by the heightened political awareness shown not by the members of our discussion group but by all the men to whom I have access. Naturally enough we are anxious that this camp should be available as soon as possible (immediately) to lovers in parked cars, that the tinkers should be seen scavenging eagerly among the deserted Nissen huts.

At the same time no-one is happy that his freedom should be threatened continually by the Special Powers Acts. Alarming stories of heavily armed soldiers paying a friendly visit to released internees to ensure that they keep their noses clean are commonplace. Such courtesies one can understand taking place in the East End of London, where it is simply a matter of a benign "evening-all" bobby keeping a humane eye on a returned tearaway.

Undoubtedly the fact that the Six County Executive of Republican Clubs recently held a public convention in Belfast attended by Tomás Mac Giolla, president of Sinn Féin without interference from the security forces would seem to indicate that our scepticism as to the future may be groundless. What would reassure more than the phasing out of internment would be the introduction of a bill of rights guaranteeing unimpeded access to the political space.

### THIRD REICH

Last week, talking to delegates from the World Peace Council, who visited the camp about the present repressive legislation, internment and the denial of the rule of law, I found myself presenting the democratic case, describing the antipolitical character of our society as it [recte if] I did not expect to be believed. One becomes almost apologetic as the description of events and practices seems to belong more to the early days of the Third Reich than to part of the present United Kingdom. Mr. Krishna Menon intervened to point out, quietly, sincerely, that once courts were corrupted by the executive then it was only a matter of time until all human freedoms were denied. Democracy cannot be administered like medicine, one apparently either kills the patient or cures him.

Our present state of suspended animation, he was surprised to learn, did not include a total ban on what is usually described as subversive literature. When I returned to Cage 2 I thought it might be of interest to examine the books we have in the hut. The list makes ironic reading and is an index of the extent to which the law has become a matter of taste in Northern Ireland, for possession of many of the books now in Long Kesh is an offence under the Special Powers Acts. On the other hand, it is probably more fruitful to see this as a chink in the grey clouds of political censorship which for so long have hung over the North.

Here it must be admitted we could learn from the English not only in Belfast but also in Dublin.

#### *Historical Footnote:*

Three into one does go after all. Sunday last saw the transfer of the Magilligan men, 78, to Long Kesh. Cage 10 houses the new arrivals. Cage 9 the men transferred from the Maidstone a few weeks ago. This seems to complete phase three of the Long Kesh expansion programme. As far as I can gather, it means in fact that we will have a holy trinity of camps under one supreme authority, Mr. Truesdale. There are rumours though that numbers 11 and 12 are in the course of construction but I doubt if it will be possible to confirm this as the sites are so far removed from this end of the complex that I understand small electric buggies will be used to ferry meals to the internees expected there.

[This letter is part of a series of 21 which appeared in The Irish Times between 15 January 1972 and 1 July 1972. Permission for the text from the letters to be archived by CAIN was provided by the current copyright holder Dónal O'Hagan. The full set of letters, plus background information can be found at: [https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/des\\_ohagan/](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/des_ohagan/) ]

