

LETTER FROM LONG KESH

The Great Indistinguishable Initiative

By Des O'Hagan

April 4, 1972

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It has happened. The persistent rumours that Mr. Heath was not alive, well, living at 10 Downing Street, have been proved to be false. This is neither [EITHER?] a good thing or a bad thing depending on one's point of view or what or to what extent one feels affected by the Conservative Prime Minister decision to initiate. Personally, and I readily admit to being partisan, I feel that the cookie has been crumbled very dexterously by a rather expert chef as I cannot distinguish any initiatives. It is like being the boy in the fairy tale who spotted that the Emperor had been conned, except that I do not expect a chorus of agreement that the King is in the [NUDE?] altogether, nor any hasty efforts to dress the present indecency in suitable covering.

Naturally, one does not expect politicians to be philosophers – even the Greeks have given that up. One is also fairly accustomed to the abuse of language in political utterances. At the same time, it is reasonable to hope that words should retain at least some of their original content or sense. It may be that I am becoming slightly testy, but I cannot see how initiative applies to the decision to suspend Stormont, appoint an advisory commission, and condemn the bucolic Mr. Whitelaw to part-time exile in Northern Ireland. To initiate suggests, as I understand it, induction into an ongoing tradition, a vital form of life. In our case, the reverse seems to have happened. Instead of a courtroom of lawyers patching up the Government of Ireland Act to secure bright, shining, democratic institutions, the wee shop, as they say in Belfast, has been wrecked. It is no wonder that the righteous Mr. Craig is on his Vanguard.

Mr. Whitelaw's assistants have the correct family background and should find little trouble identifying with the workers of the Shankill, the Falls and Creggan. The Conservative Party have this wealth of political experience which enables them to pick the right man for the job – as I was told once in a pub in North London, they know how to rule. Ampleforth Public School and the *Daily Telegraph* certainly equip one to understand the problems of the poor, troubled anxious citizens of the North. One begins to wonder just exactly whose interests these chaps will be protecting.

I do not wish to be depressing, but I have been examining the class composition of Long Kesh, and in true sociological fashion, been trying to relate the dominant class of the internees to the dominant class of the Opposition parties. The conclusion I have regrettably come to is that it would be foolish to expect the Northern Opposition political parties to maintain much longer their refusal to co-operate on account of the existence of internment.

We are a fairly homogenous population, for apart from a handful of schoolteachers, and a few businessmen, the rest of the men are either skilled workers, labourers or unemployed – in general, then, not the sort of people from whom the existing political parties draw their leadership or the bulk of their membership. This is an intuitive judgment, but I think it is fairly reliable. If that is the case, then the removal of Stormont has satisfied the urge to power of the Roman Catholic minority (middle class). The irritating continuation of internment can now be seen in its true light as a problem to be solved when the other important issues have been settled.

It must be clear that I am not my ebullient self this week, largely, I must say, due to the feelings of helplessness that one experiences in the face of an immovable, particularly obtuse bureaucracy. It may be that the following account of one of our difficulties is petty, but it is typical of the administration's attitude to internees' problems.

One of our primary aims since arriving at Long Kesh has been the provision of educational facilities for everyone who is interested in pursuing serious academic study or simply attending lectures on history, Socialism, trade union affairs, topics which appealed to the men. Various bodies were seen to assist in this work, including the Open University, which is actually in contact with approximately a

dozen potential students. The camp council is naturally concerned that facilities which are provided for a number of men should be extended to all. We have a very sensible antipathy to elites.

A concerned body of Belfast schoolteachers has also been in touch with our education subcommittee – they had hoped to begin a number of classes some weeks ago, but found that their then Ministry of Home Affairs was somewhat unco-operative. Equally, the trade unions who wished to provide lecturers were frustrated at every point. Last week, our “under-graduates” were amazed to learn at a meeting with the Open University representatives that not only was the library available (of which I will say no more), but that the study hut was in use. Definite evidence of progress, one might think, except that the story was completely untrue. Naturally, the visitors were irate at being misinformed, and they were intending to investigate.

We returned to our different cages confident that there would be no significant change in our facilities partly because we have become accustomed, but not resigned, to the frustrations imposed by a devious authority. Also, as we knew that study huts had not been provided for all the cages, the camp council would oppose any attempt to shift personnel in order to pretend that demands for education had been satisfied. (One hut could have been used to accommodate those who wished to follow a university course.) Subsequent events were downright hilarious, though the menace, the threat of violence to the entire camp, clearly illustrates how the totalitarian nature of this society damages normal human decency.

Three days later most of the “students” were abruptly informed that they would be moved to Cage 2, next to the library hut, now completed and ready for use. Our protests that this would entail breaking up long-standing relationships and that it was contrary to the camp council policy were met with commands to be prepared to move. Rather than be separated from friends, some asked for their names to be removed from the favoured list, which was again refused. Requests to meet the governor to discuss the crisis were rejected. The deputy governor, one of three, scurried back and forth conveying the united opinions as to reasonable alternatives. The final reply had, I think, a very faint echo of the Warsaw ghetto: “Move or be moved.”

The British army were brought in to ensure that, if we remained unco-operative, we would be forcibly transferred. I had a hysterical moment picturing a soldier in full battledress carrying my few books to the study hut every morning. It is reminiscent of Negro students entering an all-white university, in a perverse sort of way.

We would be hardly human if we had not spent considerable time since discussing the different aspects of the shift. It was a conversation with an English prison officer which provided me with the most significant clue yet to understanding the upper end of the bureaucracy. I suppose it is all terribly obvious on reflection – one’s own status and remuneration depends on the number of subordinates one commands; Parkinson’s Law. Long Kesh is no different. There are, as I said, three deputies, hence all dialogue is conducted *via* intermediaries. A few hundred soldiers are available to sort out our problems. It must be enticing to know that one can command their use. The result is that events become critical problems simply because the structure demands that people exercise all their power simply to reinforce the fact of their positions. It is frightening to realise that the actions of a Nazi officer in the Second World War, his behaviour towards Jews, may have derived entirely from his desire to ensure that his hard-won position in the military hierarchy was maintained.

[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/]

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