

Time to Think

Open University Journeys in British and Irish prisons during the years of conflict, 1972-2000

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This audio appears in the OpenLearn course, *Coping with isolation: Time to Think*: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/coping-isolation-time-think/content-section-overview>

MICHAEL:

I’m Michael, I’m a Republican former political prisoner. I spent 16 years in Long Kesh Prison [The H Blocks of Maze and Long Kesh Prison].

DAVID:

My name is David, I’m a Loyalist ex-prisoner. I spent 12 years in the Special Category[[1]](#footnote-1) [de facto prisoner of war status] Compounds of Long Kesh Prison.

INTERVIEWER:

*Thanks Michael and David. So, can you describe what it was like for you in those very early days of imprisonment during the conflict, and any parallels you see with what people are experiencing in 2020 entering lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

MICHAEL:

The current situation with the restrictions and the isolation which has been called for due to this virus, I see great parallels with people having to do stuff that they don't want to do as a community. Probably resentment, particularly because of the disruption to the normal routine that people are used to. And I see those type of things as parallels to what we would've experienced, being sort of taken off the streets, processed through the barracks, and put into gaol within three or four days. Yeah, I see parallels with it. Yeah. David?

DAVID:

There are parallels, but there are also significant differences. So, going back to then, you know, we obviously-- we did not have TVs and phones and all that sort of stuff. But there was that coping with loss, so similar to today with the virus, it's a loss of contact with the family. You cannot physically go touch them, hug them, be with them. The smaller things, like you cannot open the door. Prison, obviously, you do not have keys to the door. You couldn't nip down to the pub or the shop. A lot of the small stuff that makes up normal everyday life, which has been too-- disrupted to a high degree today in 2020. Michael, what was it like for you entering prison for the first time?

MICHAEL:

Yeah, well I suppose it was the same as for anybody—it was the unknown. A bit upsetting, very worrying. Yeah, the strangeness and the awkwardness had to be got used to very early on. I arrived into Crumlin Road Prison a 28-year-old social worker. I think I had my suit on. That's what I had-- the clothing I had been arrested in. So, a cell door opened, banged then behind me, and I'm in the cell with a fisherman from Donegal and a young lad from Armagh. And you know, I didn't know them from Adam. They were also Republican prisoners who'd entered Crumlin Road before me. And all of a sudden, in a very, very small confined space, maybe, I don't know, about 10 foot by about 8 foot and a set of bunk beds and a single bed. And it was a strange environment. Yeah, it was a very worrying time, a very uncertain time. I had a rough idea that it would not be nice, but I had no concept at all of the reality of what it would be. So yeah, it was entering the unknown. And yourself?

DAVID:

In terms of just trying to get used to confinement, my family would have a farming background. I would certainly be used to wide open fields, and dealing with cows, and doing all the agricultural stuff, and suddenly, to be confined and sent to a 10 by 6 space. Quite often, you could spend an entire day in the one cell with these two other guys. For me, it was quite a shock to the system. Obviously, there was no preparation or training for that. There was no experience in the entire family of anybody being in trouble, so it really was a new sort of beginning for me, and it took quite a lot of getting used to.

1. Special Category Status (SCS) was given to those charged with political offences under British Emergency Powers from 1972 until it was withdrawn by the British Government in 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)