What's the Difference between Ireland and Iceland? One Letter and a Decent Prison System …*

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Summary: This paper identifies aspects of the prison system in Iceland that offer positive models for Ireland. Although Iceland experienced a similar financial crash to Ireland, Iceland's penal policies remain very much in tune with Nordic approaches, which have largely resisted the punitive impulses evident in English-speaking countries. Comparisons between the prison systems of Ireland and Iceland reveal a much lower rate of incarceration, and more socially inclusive attitudes, in the latter. The paper examines, in particular, prison regimes in each country; on most criteria, conditions and the manner of treating people in prison in Iceland are seen to be significantly better than in Ireland. The thinking behind the different policies and practices is explored: concepts such as 'dynamic security', 'balancing care and custody' and 'normalisation' have much greater currency in the prison system of Iceland than in that of Ireland.

Keywords: Ireland, Iceland, penal policy, prison conditions, treatment of prisoners, care and custody.

Introduction: A 'punitive turn'?

Those who shape prison systems in different countries can learn from each other. In this paper, I identify aspects of the prison system in Iceland that offer positive models for Ireland. There has been considerable discussion in recent years around the contrasts in penal policy between Nordic and 'anglophone' countries (Pratt, 2008; Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012; Pratt and

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Ericksson, 2013). While a pronounced punitive trend has been identified in English-speaking countries in recent decades, it is argued that Nordic countries are 'exceptional' to this trend and have to a large extent resisted punitiveness in penal policy. Most of this discussion examines the continental Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), while Iceland – although sharing much with these in terms of history, geography, language and culture – is hardly ever probed. Iceland is a Nordic country, but is seen as an 'outlier' in many respects. However, in some ways, the manner in which prisons are run in Iceland, *and especially the thinking behind its penal policy,* offer salutary 'lessons' for Ireland.

The banking and economic crash experienced in Ireland from 2008 followed soon after a similar catastrophe in Iceland. The parallel downward experience of the two countries led to an ironic joke circulating widely in Ireland at the time of the Icelandic crash: 'What's the difference between Ireland and Iceland?' The prescient answer was: 'one letter and six months'. However similar the financial stories of the two countries may be, their criminal justice and penal systems have taken markedly different paths – hence the adaptation of the old joke in the title of this article.

In Ireland, substantial evidence of a 'punitive turn' in penal policy is clear from the late 1990s. This is most marked in a doubling of the prison population over 15 years, but detectable also in a worsening of prison conditions and much more negative representation of those sent to prison – although it should be noted that demeaning rhetoric about those who fall foul of the law is not always consistent, nor fully followed through in practice, in the Irish context (Warner 2011; Hamilton, 2014).

Penal policy and practice have remained much more restrained in Iceland over these decades:

> It is noteworthy, despite a marked population increase in Iceland during past years, that the total prison capacity did not increase markedly since the 1990s … the Icelandic per capita imprisonment rate [is] low, or around 45 per 100 thousand inhabitants, below almost all other European nations. (Gunnlaugsson, 2011: 28–9)

At the same time, there has been a significant increase in alternatives to prison in Iceland since the turn of the century, especially in the use of fines, probation, community service and electronic monitoring. Thus, Iceland remains an example of 'Scandinavian exceptionalism', 'characterized by relatively short sentences and a small prison population' (Gunnlaugsson, 2011: 32).

More than 30 years ago, the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System in Ireland (commonly known as the Whitaker Report) summarised its approach to penal policy in asserting 'the principles of minimum use of custody, minimum use of security and normalisation of prison life' (Whitaker Report, 1985: 90). Key assumptions underlying that prescription are the awareness that prisons damage people, that they have 'detrimental effects' and that it is the deprivation of freedom that is the sentence and no more. Very similar thinking and approaches are to be found in Council of Europe policy documents, especially in the *European Prison Rules* (Council of Europe, 2006) and in Nordic countries generally. This outlook may be broadly located within what David Garland (2001) calls 'penal welfarism'.

The opposite approach has been described by Garland (2001) as 'a culture of control' and by Pratt *et al.* (2005) as 'the new punitiveness'. Greater punitiveness can be detected in the prison systems of many countries, and especially English-speaking ones, in recent decades. Instead of 'minimum use of custody', excessive numbers are sent to prison; the prison population of Ireland, for example, doubled between 1995 and 2014.[1] Instead of 'minimum use of security', there can often now be disproportionate emphasis on severity, restriction and control, and a corresponding drift away from approaches that help and support people in prison. And, instead of accepting those in prison as 'normal' – as citizens and members of our society – there tend to be patterns of demonisation, stereotyping and exclusion. Garland speaks of 'stereotypical depictions of unruly youth, dangerous predators, and incorrigible career criminals' (2001: 10).

So, a useful shorthand way to analyse penal policy and practice is to ask what is happening in relation to three criteria:

1. What is the scale of imprisonment?
2. What is the 'depth' or severity of imprisonment?
3. How are people in prison perceived and represented?

In what follows, I keep these three criteria in mind when comparing the prison systems of Ireland and Iceland, but dwell on the second in particular, focusing on the kind of 'regimes' there are for men and women

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[1] The Council of Europe's *Penological Information Bulletin* No. 21 gives the prison population of Ireland on 1 September 1995 as 2054. The 'World Prison Brief' of The International Centre for Prison Studies, London, gives a figure of 4104 for 1 April 2014.

held in prison. A key assumption in this discussion is that prisons themselves can be 'criminogenic', and especially that the way men and women are treated in prison can either support or undercut desistance. Moreover, the way they are treated is clearly related to the way they are represented and perceived – so, the issue of social inclusion is also a dimension of this discussion.[2]

'Contrasts in tolerance'[3]

Penal policy in Ireland has become considerably more punitive since the mid-1990s and, in particular, regimes have degenerated and become far more damaging (Warner, 2012, 2014). By contrast, an examination of policy and practice in such countries as Denmark, Finland and Norway clearly identifies better models from which Ireland might learn lessons (Warner, 2009). The latter research described three Nordic prison systems, in all of which incarceration is significantly lower than in Ireland; where alternatives to custody are used much more readily; and where those who break the law tend, to a far greater extent, to be regarded as 'members of society'.

In particular, this research detailed prison regimes in which conditions and the way people are treated are much more supportive and less destructive. Nordic prisons typically insist on single cells, allow 12 to 14 hours' out-of-cell time in closed prisons, ensure full days of purposeful activity and allow prisoners extensive opportunities for 'self-management' – such as buying and cooking their own food.

Nordic prison systems also make much greater use of open prisons, most notably in Denmark where, at any time, there are far more sentenced men and women in *open* prisons than in closed ones. For example, the average occupancy of sentenced prisoners in closed Danish prisons in 2012 was 884, far below the average occupancy of 1309 in open prisons for that year (Kristoffersen, 2013: 44).

This paper focuses on Iceland with a view to offering further evidence that there can be better ways of approaching imprisonment. Iceland has a rate of incarceration that is close to half that of Ireland. As will be seen, 'quality of life' and conditions in Icelandic prisons are vastly more constructive and supportive than in Ireland. Underpinning these features

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[2] For an example of the relationship between the way prisoners are perceived and how they are treated, see Costelloe and Warner (2014).

[3] This heading draws on the title of the famous 1988 book by David Downes, *Contrasts in Tolerance: Post-war Penal Policy in The Netherlands and England and Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

are considerably different societal attitudes towards those in prison, with Iceland regarding men and women in prison much more inclusively.

The data listed in 1–20 below indicate, in broad-brush fashion, contrasts in penal policy and practice between Ireland (IRE) and Iceland (ICE). For the most part, these are sharp contrasts. Most of the aspects discussed relate to 'regimes', i.e. to the way people in prison are treated and their conditions of custody. The information draws on various written sources, and especially on a research visit to Iceland in June 2013, when I went to four of Iceland's six prisons, attended a workshop on the post-release 'halfway house' and interviewed a number of individuals.

The data include information from CPT reports on Ireland (2011) and Iceland (2013), Kristoffersen's *Correctional Statistics* (2014) and the 'World Prison Brief' of the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) in London. In Ireland, material published by the Irish Prison Service/ Department of Justice and Equality and answers to parliamentary questions are used. In Iceland, official (Fengelsi.is) and other websites that carry material about prisons have been useful, as well as articles by Erlandur Baldursson (2000) and Helgi Gunnlaugsson (2011) in particular.

There were 147 men and women in prison in Iceland as of 1 January 2014 and 3798 in prison in Ireland as of 29 February 2016.[4] The following contrasts in penal policy and practice are notable.

1. *Rate of incarceration* per 100,000 of the general population: 45 in ICE, 82 in IRE.
2. *The balance between sentences in the community and prison sentences*: ICE tends to have twice as many people serving a sentence in the community as in prison, whereas IRE has a very strong tendency to resort to imprisonment.[5]
3. Approximate *percentage of prison population in open prisons*: 25% in ICE, 5% in IRE.

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[4] Source: 'World Prison Brief' of the International Centre of Prison Studies, London. http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief (accessed 1 April 2016).
[5] For Iceland, see Kristoffersen (2014: 27), where the average number of registered clients in the Probation Service for 2012 was given as 320, which may be compared to the average prison population for the same year of 159 (when those living in the halfway house are excluded, p. 22). In relation to Ireland, O'Mahony (2002: 552–553) states: 'the majority of convicted Irish offenders are sent to prison for relatively minor acts of property theft … imprisonment rates clearly point to a comparative overuse of prison, particularly in regard to the breadth of use'.

4. Normal *out-of-cell time in closed prisons*: 14 hours in ICE, 6 to 7 hours in IRE.

5. Extent of *cell-sharing*: 5% in ICE (to become 0% in 2016 when the new prison in Holmsheidi is opened), over 50% in IRE.[6]

6. Extent of *segregation within prisons*: One 'secure unit' for 10 in ICE, severe segregation in all of Ireland's seven largest prisons.[7]

7. *Toilets in privacy*: 100% in ICE, 52% in IRE.[8]

8. *Self-management* by prisoners, in particular cooking for themselves: 90% in ICE (to be 100% when Holmsheidi Prison opens), well below 5% in IRE.[9]

9. *Average prison size*: 29 in ICE (the largest prison holds 87); 292 in IRE (the largest, the Midlands, has about 820).

10. Normal *visiting arrangements*: Over two hours per week in private 'in well-equipped and pleasantly decorated facilities' (CPT, 2013, 60) in ICE; in IRE, closely supervised, often without any physical contact permitted, in crowded, institutional and often chaotic conditions, for 30 minutes per week.

11. *System of regular and structured prison leave*: Yes in ICE, no in IRE.

12. Prisoners' *access to Ombudsman*: Yes in ICE, no in IRE.

13. *Remission*: One-quarter for all prisoners in IRE, but one-third in ICE (and frequently increased to half). For those under 21, standard remission is a half in ICE, but only a quarter in IRE.

14. *Preparation for release*: In ICE, standard procedure involves moves to an open prison and/or to the halfway house, and social work support for accommodation, employment, etc. In ICE, the Vernd halfway house in the middle of Reykjavik accommodates 23 released prisoners at a time (about 15% of the prison population) and they all leave this house daily to go to work, education or treatment. Electronic

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[6] When Icelandic prisons were visited in June 2013, only four cells were 'doubled up'; these were in the old Hegningarhusid Prison in central Reykjavik. This prison is due to be replaced by a new one in 2016. The Irish figure is calculated from an answer to a parliamentary question by Ciaran Lynch TD on 13 May 2014.

[7] The 'secure unit' at Litla-Hraun Prison is referred to in the CPT report, 2013. For detailed descriptions of segregation in Irish prisons, see Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2012), especially Chapter 4.

[8] See parliamentary answer to Ciaran Lynch TD on 13 May 2014.

[9] Only the old (and soon to be replaced) Hegningarhusid Prison in Reykjavik, which holds about 14 prisoners, cannot facilitate full self-catering. Dinners in Hegningarhusid are delivered into this prison from a nearby hospital, although prisoners there do put together other meals for themselves, and all meals are eaten with others in small dining areas rather than in cells.

monitoring to facilitate early release is an additional option since 2012. In IRE, such supports are, relatively speaking, rare.

15. *Structured activities* (education, work, etc.): Available to most prisoners, but often somewhat limited, in both ICE and IRE.

16. *Participation in higher education by prisoners*: 4% in ICE, just over 1% in IRE.[10]

17. *Drug treatment facility*: 11 places in ICE (for a prison population of 147), nine places in IRE (for a population of 3798). ICE is thus *30 times more responsive* than IRE in this regard.[11]

18. *Overall material conditions*: Good in ICE (as verified by CPT, and also observed); widely sub-standard in IRE.

19. *New prisons*: Both IRE and ICE have made significant investment in new prisons that will replace outdated facilities, in Cork and Holmsheidi respectively, and each will open in 2016. However, while the new Icelandic prison will hold 56 in single cells 'with alcoves inside the cells that provide each detainee with a view and daylight',[12] the new Cork Prison, behind walls 7.2 m high, will hold nearly all prisoners in double-occupancy cells – in serious breach of the European Prison Rules.

20. *'Moral performance'*: In ICE, 'inmates praised staff … [prisons have a] positive atmosphere' (CPT, 2013: 36); in IRE, there are real concerns in relation to safety and humane treatment (CPT, 2011).[13]

The last mentioned feature, 'moral performance', assesses the two prison systems against Alison Liebling's (2004) key concept. While recognising the importance of material standards, Liebling is rightly more concerned 'with less easily quantifiable features of the prison experience, and in particular, with perceptions of justice, fairness, safety, order, humanity,

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[10] In Iceland, six prisoners (4% of the prison population) were studying at university level in June 2013. This information was provided by some of these prisoner-students during visits to prisons that summer by the author. In Ireland, 47 were studying with the Open University in May 2015, as was revealed in a parliamentary answer to Ciaran Lynch TD on 13 May 2015.

[11] In Iceland, there are 11 places in a special unit in Litla-Hraun Prison, where prisoners can follow 'a dedicated drug treatment programme' that consists, among other thing, 'of individual and group therapy, lectures, meditation sessions and AA meetings' (CPT, 2013, paragraph 58 and footnote 57). In Ireland, the only comparable unit is in the Medical Care Unit of Mountjoy Prison and this has nine places.

[12] See 'Design of New Prison in Reykjavik Determined', http://icelandreview.com/news/2012/06/06/design-new-prison-reykjavik-determined (accessed 1 April 2016).

[13] For further descriptions of regimes in Irish prisons, see Warner (2012, 2014).

trust, and opportunities for personal development', which she calls the 'moral performance' of the prison (p. 50). The point can be made, of course, that material standards and the less tangible 'moral performance' are often closely related. It is the view of this author that the two have deteriorated in tandem in Irish prisons since the mid-1990s.

Contrasts in thinking

For the most part, as is clear from the data above, prisons and overall penal policy in Ireland fare very poorly in comparison with Iceland. It can be asserted, of course, that Iceland is a society that is considerably smaller and very different in many ways to Ireland. However, this argument has limited explanatory value, especially when one recognises that many of the features in penal policy and practice that are seen in Iceland can be found also in other Nordic countries, which are much closer to Ireland in terms of size, history and economic structure.

We need to look at *the thinking* underpinning penal policy and practice to decipher the main source of Iceland's penal constraint. However, the ideas and attitudes that underpin the 20 features listed above in relation to Iceland are very similar to those found in Council of Europe policy documents such as the Recommendation on the treatment of long-term prisoners (2003) and the *European Prison Rules* (2006) – especially the principles that prison should be used as a last resort, that the detrimental effects of imprisonment must be countered, that the dignity of the person in prison must be seen as fundamental, that prisoners are citizens and members of society, and that there should be a focus on resettlement.

The three criteria for assessing prison systems outlined in the Introduction clearly reinforce each other: the scale of imprisonment, the 'depth' of imprisonment, and the perception of the person held in prison. If the *scale* of imprisonment is escalated so that prisons become overcrowded and regimes consequently degenerate, then we see a worsening in the *depth* of imprisonment. Evans and Morgan state:

> It is notable that those countries with the lowest incarceration rates tend also to have the shallowest systems, that is a high proportion of prisoners in small relatively open institutions with liberal regimes. Rising incarceration rates tend to be accompanied by the growth of more restrictive prison regimes. This is scarcely surprising since to the extent that growth in the use of imprisonment reflects a political will to

get 'tough on crime', it is to be expected that toughness will be extended to the provision of more restrictive regimes. (1998: 325)

Moreover, a negatively stereotyped *perception* of the men and women who are in prison – seeing them as 'other' rather than as 'valued members of society' – will obviously contribute to their greater incarceration and facilitate at least an indifference to their ill-treatment (see Warner, 2011). These patterns have been evident in Ireland over the past two decades, and we can see a departure in Ireland from approaches that still dominate in Iceland in relation to all three of these criteria.

However, it is the 'quality' rather than the 'quantity' of imprisonment that will now be examined more fully here, i.e. the extent to which there is 'minimum use of security and normalisation of prison life'. The 'depth' or 'quality' of imprisonment can be explored by means of a number of concepts widely used in penology, and we can develop the contrast between Iceland and Ireland around these terms.

The idea that there should be a *'balance' between 'care' and 'custody'* (or 'control') recurs frequently in European discourse on prisons. For example, an advisory committee set up by the Minister of Justice in Iceland in 1991, to make proposals on future strategy in the prison system, reflected this thinking, while consciously following the European Prison Rules and the outlook of the Nordic Prison Officers Association. The committee stated:

> The role of the prison officer is twofold, embracing both custody and treatment … The urge to punish has been reduced, while humanitarian viewpoints have gained greater weight … Communication between prison staff and prisoners is a key element in all prison work … Operating a prison entails influencing people, not just counting prisoners and turning keys. (quoted in Gislasan, 2008: 64)

Gislasan recounts how, subsequent to this committee's report, the training of prison officers in Iceland focused, among other things, on 'interpersonal communication and dynamic security' and on promoting 'humanitarian considerations' (2008: 65). A 2005 Ministerial committee on prison officer training said this should involve highlighting 'officers' security and surveillance function, on the one hand, *but … give no less prominence to their role in caring for and communicating with prisoners*' (Gislasan, 2008: 70; emphasis added). A 2004 document setting out the aims of the prison

system in Iceland states: 'At the end of the individual's prison term, measures should be taken, in consultation with him, to ensure that he has a fixed abode, is in communication with his family and/or friends and knows how to seek help, so managing to find his way in society' (Gislasan, 2008: 71).

Helgi Gunnlaugsson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Iceland, is critical of conditions in several of Iceland's older prisons, although (as can be seen from the above contrasts) these conditions are in most respects a good deal better than those in Ireland. On the other hand, he emphasises what he sees as a marked change in Icelandic prisons in recent years towards

> a human approach … they care for the prisoners. I can see a shift in how the directors [of the prison administration] and the governors and the guards approach inmates. It's more human, it's more care, and I see a shift towards that … a shift towards meeting the needs of prisoners.

He cites improved access to education as one example of prisoners' needs being met. Although a minority of former prisoners remain stigmatised by society, such as those who have committed sexual crimes, he is of the view that there is 'a really good chance of reintegrating to society' after release; the prison sentence 'is not going to haunt you'.[14]

It should be noted that some of the issues listed among the 20 points of contrast in the previous section – such as the extent of unlock time, the size of prisons, material conditions and the availability of purposeful activity – can either facilitate or work against the requirement that prison officers relate to and communicate with prisoners. For example, such engagement becomes much more difficult when a prisoner is locked up each day for 17 or 18 hours, which is the norm in Ireland (and hundreds of prisoners are locked up for far longer than that each day). As was noted above, the most recent CPT report was complimentary with regard to relationships and atmosphere in Icelandic prisons.

Of course, like many high aspirations, official statements pledging adherence to progressive penal policy may not always be followed through in practice. In Ireland, an official strategic report in 1997 also advocated a rebalancing of care and custody in the direction of care (the 'McAuley

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[14] The quotations in this paragraph are from an interview by the author with Professor Gunnlaugsson in Reykjavik on 5 June 2013.

Report'). Yet, in subsequent years, a quite blinkered and heavy-handed idea of security came to dominate, so that now a great number of those who live in Irish prisons are held in very restricted caged areas and are locked in cells for excessive periods with little that can be described as 'care' or 'normality'.

One example of this regression can be found in the CPT report for Ireland issued in 2011, which was severely critical of the prevalence of inter-prisoner violence and advocated a response to the problem that was similar to that of the Icelandic strategy committee quoted above. The CPT said, in part:

> Addressing the phenomenon of inter-prisoner violence requires that prison staff must be alert to signs of trouble and both resolved and properly trained to intervene. The existence of positive relations between staff and prisoners, *based on the notions of dynamic security and care*, is a decisive factor in this context; this will depend in large measure on staff possessing appropriate *interpersonal communication skills* … Moreover, it is imperative that concerted action is taken to provide prisoners with *purposeful activities*. (CPT, 2011: 33; emphasis added)

The idea of *dynamic security*, which is advocated here by the CPT, is frequently referred to in other Nordic and European contexts. Among other things, it envisages a fostering of relationships, constructive activity and treating prisoners as individuals. The idea of balancing care and custody is very close to the concept of dynamic security. 'Dynamic security' is described by Dunbar (1985) and Coyle (2005), and the concept can be found in many European statements of penal policy, such as in the Council of Europe's Recommendation on the treatment of long-term prisoners (Council of Europe, 2003).

When CPT reports are published, they are accompanied by a response from the government investigated. The Irish government's response to the above CPT recommendation is surprising. It seems to misunderstand entirely what the CPT advocated, and in particular 'the notion of dynamic security and care'. Instead, as their response to the problem of inter-prisoner violence, the Irish authorities set out a long list of restrictive physical measures which they have deployed or propose to deploy, not one of which reflects these concepts. The Irish list includes: solitary confinement for men deemed in danger, tighter control and monitoring, greater use of cameras and probe systems, the installation of nets over

yards, a drug detection dog service and the introduction of more BOSS (Body Orifice Security Scanner) chairs.[15] It is difficult to work out whether the concepts of care and dynamic security were just not understood or were simply ignored by the Irish authorities. The reality is that Irish prisons are today severe and oppressive places for the majority of those held in them.

The extent to which the role of the Irish prison officer in the Irish prison system has become even more tilted towards the custody end of the care–custody balance – in contrast to their Icelandic colleagues – is documented in a 2012 report on the Irish prison system (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2012: 68–72). The imbalance is evident, for example, in the assignment of over 140 additional prison staff to 'enhanced security measures' to prevent 'access to contraband items, primarily mobile phones and drugs', and a 'Drug Detection Dog Unit (comprising 31 staff)' in 2008 and 2009 (Irish Prison Service, 2010: 4, 25). It is clear that while priority is given to such security roles for prison officers, which keep them distanced from prisoners, roles that enable staff to engage positively with men and women in prison and build relationships with them, such as in training-instructor posts, have been severely weakened. Instead of promoting 'dynamic security' and enabling officers to engage with prisoners so as to offer support and motivation, 'physical control [has become] the default response of the Irish prison authorities to dealing with the management of prisoners' (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2012: 71).

There are two other important and related concepts which, when examined, expose further differences between the experience of imprisonment in Iceland and Ireland. These are the idea of '*normalisation*' as something for which prison systems are expected to strive, and *the recognition of people in prison as part of society*. Obviously, these two ideas are also linked, for if a person in prison is seen as a member of society, he or she is more likely to be treated in a 'normal' manner. Clearly, Irish prisons fall far short of normalisation. We need only look, for example, at what happens in Ireland in relation to visits to prisoners, at the toilet arrangements there are for many, at a prisoner's lack of control over basic daily activities such as cooking his or her own food, at how few open prisons there are, or at the prohibition on access to the Ombudsman

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[15] Response by Government of Ireland to CPT Report, paragraph 33, available at http://www.cpt. coe.int/documents/irl/2011-04-inf-eng.htm (accessed 22 June 2015).

(which would indicate recognition of one's citizenship). While the situation in Iceland is by no means perfect, people in prison are treated in a more constructive manner there and we can assume they are far less likely to become institutionalised and damaged by imprisonment.

This discussion relates to a final concept: *what is a 'good' prison*? Erlendur Baldursson has long worked as a senior official in the Icelandic prison system. He is clear and grounded when he speaks about prisons. He says: 'small institutions function better' because 'the problems that emerge, and there are problems in all prisons, are more visible and can therefore more easily be discussed and solved' (Baldursson, 2000: 7).

Baldursson stresses, however, that what he means by a prison functioning better 'does not refer to recidivism in the first place, but rather to reducing human suffering when serving a prison sentence' (p. 8). Such recognition of the damage imprisonment causes is a core issue for him, and for the prison system. Baldursson is adamant that 'a prison is a prison' (p. 6); that there is no such thing as 'a good prison' (p. 7); he refers repeatedly to 'the damage caused to people by imprisonment itself' (p. 9); and he says 'putting people in prison contributes only by a marginal degree to solving crime problems' (p. 12). Minimising imprisonment and humane containment are clearly dominant impulses in shaping Iceland's prison system.

Interestingly, these two crucial concepts – minimising imprisonment and 'humane containment' – also underpinned the major report on the Irish prison system by the Whitaker Committee over 30 years ago (Whitaker Report, 1985). However, in Ireland, it seems that such wise insights from within our own country as to what penal policy should be, as well as the better models that can be found currently in other countries, are all equally ignored. Consequently, thousands suffer and are damaged, society at large loses also, and millions of euro are wasted on backward ways of dealing with the troubled and the troublesome in our society.[16]

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[16] For a more general discussion of imprisonment in Europe, see Carroll and Warner (2014).

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