



From Cappagh to jail spell for Dublin Tory

“TAKE the cucumbers, Jonno! It’s your only hope of surviving in the nick. Take the bloody cucumbers!” Cucumbers is Cockney slang for numbers and an inmate in Her Majesty’s Prison Belmarsh was urging former British Cabinet Minister Jonathan Aitken to embrace Rule 43, entitling new arrivals to be segregated from other prisoners.

The Dublin-born politician, broadcaster and born again Christian was in Ireland as the ambassador for the **Cappagh Hospital Foundation** (CHF). He spoke about ‘Overcoming Adversity’ at an IFP Media breakfast aimed at raising awareness about corporate support for CHF’s specialist orthopaedic centre. Aitken, 72, was christened in St Patrick’s Cathedral.

Guests included family friend Eamon de Valera, who wanted to show that his government and the Catholic Church were not connected at the umbilical cord.

As a child in Cappagh in the 1940s, Aitken was treated for tuberculosis, an incurable disease until antibiotics came on the scene in 1949. The TB spread from his lungs into his bones, so he was high risk. There were serious doubts as to whether he may ever walk – or even survive.

He remembers Cappagh with gratitude and affection and the work of surgeon Henry McAuley. The Little Sisters of Mercy’s Sr Mary Finbar was convinced he would leave the hospital a well boy. She taught Aitken how to read by lantern light. He was amused by the sister’s muffled cries of “drat it!” and “bother!”

While his experience of Cappagh was “very loving”, his grandmother, a staunch Protestant, was worried he would come under the Pope’s influence, who she dubbed “Old Red Socks”.

John Betjeman was ushered from the British Embassy to ensure the boy was kept safe from Catholicism. He recalls opera singer John McCormack serenading patients.

In 1999, Aitken was sentenced to 18 months at Belmarsh category A men’s prison in south London for perverting the course of justice and perjury, having committed what he admits were “supreme acts of folly”.

He had sworn on oath that his wife had settled his bill in a Paris hotel before finally conceding he had accepted the hospitality of an Arab friend.

He sued the ‘Guardian’ and ITV’s ‘World in Action’ for libel as he vowed to “cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism”. A Eurosceptic who “flirted” with Ukip, Aitken says if Britain leaves the EU it will have little impact and they will return to bilateral trade.

He agrees with recent polls predicting the ‘Brexit’ vote could be extremely tight. Apart from writing, his prison reform work and fundraising efforts keep him busy.

with Michael Cullen

