

I found kindness, camaraderie and humour in prison. I hope he does too

Comment

By Jonathan Aitken



David Chaytor will find the start of his sentence a cultural and personal shock. A high-profile inmate carrying the baggage of the parliamentary expenses scandal should be prepared for a bumpy ride from some of his fellow prisoners and from the media.

But the bumps should not be too serious, nor last too long – provided he keeps his head down, avoids being a tall poppy, and goes with the flow of life on the inside.

I make these predictions from my own difficult yet strangely encouraging experiences. When I arrived in HMP Belmarsh on 8 June 1999 the initial impact was disorienting. From the moment I entered “the cage” (the big communal reception cell) the cacophony of unfamiliar noise, the high-voltage emotions of anger and despair from just-sentenced men

coming straight from court, and the unexpected rituals of reception all put me off balance.

One saving grace, which will be shared by David Chaytor, was that I had pleaded guilty and was unsurprised by my sentence. So I did not join in the noisy protestations of innocence which seemed to be voiced by about half the prisoners in the cage along with much cursing of judges and juries.

The rituals of prison induction are unsettling. They include strip searching, mugshots, finger printing, the issue of ill-fitting uniforms and the confiscation of personal items (belts, shoe laces, notebooks with ring binders) that could possibly be used for self-harming.

Another oddity, which provided me with a rare moment of humour, was my interview with the prison psychiatrist, who had to assess whether I was a suicide risk. He inquired if anyone other than my immediate family knew I had been sent to prison. When I replied that I thought between 10 and 15 million people knew, the psychiatrist

asked me a supplementary question in a tone which was kind, if not clinical: “Have you ever suffered from delusions?”

Prison is a good place for shedding delusions. Whether you’re an ex-MP or an ex-rock star, you soon find there’s no such thing as an important inmate. All are equal in prison uniform. Any attempt to suggest you think otherwise will be met with some aggressive verbals from your fellow cons.

But if you fit in and join the fraternity of the fallen with quiet acceptance, the chemistry on the wing can start to feel friendly. Even among men who have done bad deeds, kindness, camaraderie and humour can prevail.

For all their problems, our prisons are on the whole run humanely. Prison officers deserve more credit than they get for working under constant pressure. If they bark at a high-profile inmate, as they occasionally did to me, they are doing you a favour by showing that there is no special treatment for public figures.

David Chaytor’s life as a public figure is over, but if he does his bird quietly, accepts his mistakes and starts to think positively about a different life after release, he may find the road to rehabilitation less difficult than it feels on day one.

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