



Allowing prisoners to have the vote would be criminal Jonathan Aitken

Of all the issues that are of genuine concern to prisoners, voting rights will be at or near the bottom of the list for most inmates. If jail life could be compared to the Olympics, this topic would have the rating of tiddlywinks, not the 100 metres.

The European Court of Human Rights evidently has different priorities. As an ex-prisoner I care as much about rehabilitation and human rights for offenders as any Strasbourg judge. Yet I regard this ruling by the court as unnecessary, impractical and morally flawed.

All convicted prisoners have broken their obligations to keep to the laws of society. So it does not seem unreasonable for society to impose on lawbreakers a penalty that withdraws not only their freedom, but also one of the most important privileges of freedom — the right to vote. This has been the position in most Western democracies for years. Why change it?

In the United States those jailed for

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felonies lose their right to vote until they file an application to the governor of their state proving that they have changed their ways. But from my own experiences of living with and mentoring prisoners I believe that remarkably few of them would normally have much interest in voting at elections during their sentences anyway.

The practicalities will also cause huge trouble and expense for the already overstretched prison staff. At a time when Ministry of Justice budgets are already under severe pressure, who is going to administer and pay for the electoral arrangements of a constantly churning prison population? Consider the problems at HMP Brixton, where the average stay among its inmates is 35 days. How can the voter registration process possibly be made to work amid such mobility? How can postal votes be organised? Who is going to supervise the numerous ballot boxes that will have to be moved from secure wing to secure-wing "polling stations"?

How will voter fraud be prevented among some of the most experienced fraudsters in the country? Merely to ask such questions indicates the headaches that will afflict prison governors now tasked with becoming returning officers.

As for the results, my one-man poll predicts a prison landslide for the Right. Cons tend to be conservative, not just with a small "c" but more likely with a big "B" for BNP. Several of them I met during my sojourn in Belmarsh opined that Maggie was a bit of all right, but too soft on Europe. Could they ever have guessed that Europe in the form of the ECHR would go soft in the head?

Jonathan Aitken was a Conservative MP from 1974 to 1997