

Opinion

Make them examples – but to other inmates

Edward Woollard need not despair. He, and others like him, can help others to go straight

Jonathan Aitken



A season of exemplary sentences may be upon us. It is not immediately recognisable that there is a link between the 18-month jail term given to David Chaytor for fraudulent parliamentary expense claims and the two years and eight months passed on the 18-year-old Edward Woollard for throwing a fire extinguisher from a roof during a student fees protest.

Yet in both cases the sentencing judges made it plain that they were sending a clear signal to the public, and to parliamentarians and student demonstrators, that such crimes would be punished with serious custodial penalties.

I believe that the sentences in the Chaytor and Woollard cases were right. My own 18-month sentence for perjury in 1999 was right too, and for similar reasons. It is the duty of the judiciary to make examples of those in a position of public trust who break the law. It is a comparable judicial duty to protect the public from demonstrators who extend the right to protest into acts of dangerous criminal violence.

This type of exemplary sentencing has an effective history. Those with long memories will recall how the tough jail terms imposed by Mr Justice Stable on white Notting Hill rioters in 1958 helped to lay the ground for the

first Notting Hill Carnival the following year.

But even though today's judges are getting it right, I have some unease about exemplary penalties. My anxiety has little to do with sentences that are imposed by the courts but a lot to do with how these sentences will be served in prison. Our system should be far more imaginative in using offenders who pose no long-term danger to the public as agents for rehabilitation — both personal and general — within the prison community.

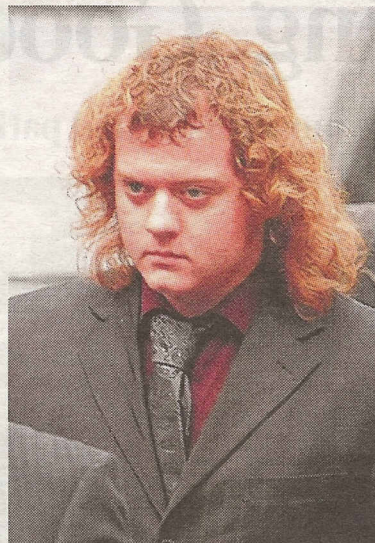
On the day that Chaytor was sentenced his solicitor described him as a "broken man". I know the feeling. But brokenness need not be a permanent condition. There is a worthwhile life for an educated and community service-minded inmate both inside prison and afterwards.

Sadly, too many middle-class offenders remain as broken as they feel on the day of their sentence

Prisoners of previous good character can be mentors and teachers

throughout their sentence — and for long after their release. The result is a wasted life. This is what Woollard's mother predicted outside the courtroom this week when she expressed the fear that the incident could ruin her son's future.

Ruin or rehabilitation? The choice is partly within the character of the individual prisoner but the system could do far more to encourage the rehabilitative process to take root. Those who are given exemplary



Woollard's mother is afraid the fire extinguisher incident could ruin him

sentences have the potential to become examples themselves of how to cope with the incarceration experience and how to rebuild a life after release. I know this path and I do not pretend it is an easy one.

But at present there are virtually no opportunities for inmates to be given even the smallest responsibilities in our jails. Why not? A Chaytor or a Woollard is most unlikely to escape, behave badly or reoffend.

The Government is talking about the "rehabilitation revolution" but its good ideas do not seem to include making use of the best source of available rehabilitators — prisoners of previous good character. Put them to work as mentors, teachers, counsellors and community leaders. They will

raise their own self-esteem and morale by doing something useful during their sentences. More importantly, they could guide other members of the fraternity of the fallen into taking the road back into law-abiding lives.

One third of the men and women in our jails cannot read or write. Who would be their best teachers of basic literacy skills? Their fellow inmates, as we already know from an admirable but tiny charity, Toe to Toe, which organises a successful scheme for this kind of prisoner-to-prisoner tuition. Roll it out nationally, with full backing from the Prison Service, and make it a mandatory scheme.

A great deal of skills training, education, counselling and course supervision (everything from AA to IT) could be handled by educated prisoners working alongside charities. Not all of this needs to be done behind bars. There is a good day-release scheme, ROTL (released on temporary licence), which sends some 1,800 low-risk prisoners out to work in the community for the last few months of their sentences. It should be expanded, particularly for those helping to rehabilitate their fellow inmates and the recently released. It would also be helpful if the Government would introduce the legislation for the promised reform of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

Before we start building extra prison wings for parliamentarians, student protesters and other middle-class offenders, we need to give more thought on how to use them as a resource in the rehabilitation revolution.

Jonathan Aitken was a Conservative MP from 1974 to 1997