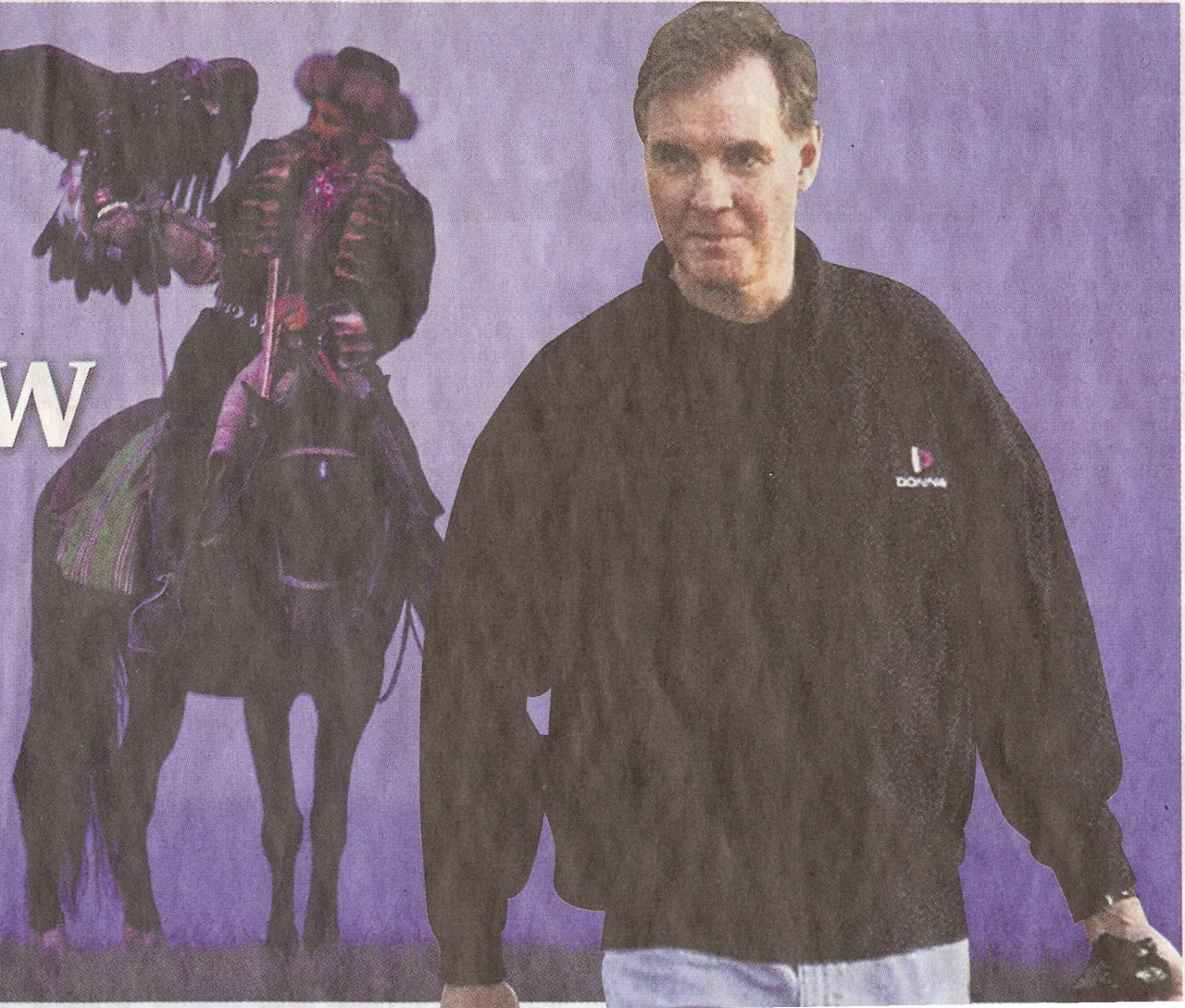


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Kazakh jails show Aitken way to reform



Isabel Oakeshott
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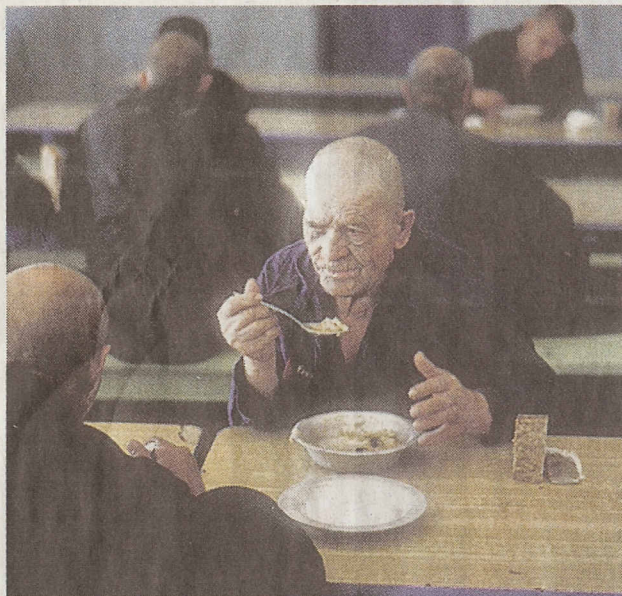
THEY are grim concrete fortresses where inmates have complained of beatings and torture. Yet Kazakhstan's prisons have become an unlikely test-bed for Tory reforms to the UK penal system, from proposals put forward by Jonathan Aitken — the former cabinet minister and former convict.

Aitken has convinced the leader of the former Soviet republic — best known as the home of Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen's fictional journalist — to try out new techniques to cut reoffending. Rather than face hard labour and solitary confinement, Kazakh convicts in four jails are now being encouraged to paint, train as paramedics and car mechanics and even form Beatles tribute bands.

“Kazakhstan's prisons were mostly built under Stalin and are pretty grim to look at from the outside — but what's going on behind bars is quite incredible,” said Aitken. “We have prisoners learning to become welders and car mechanics and taking part in woodwork classes. Some aspects of their system are far better than ours.”

Aitken, whose ideas for prison reform were published last year in a report for the think tank set up by Iain Duncan Smith, the former Tory leader, believes that the new training and leisure activities will help keep inmates out of trouble after release.

Last year Manfred Nowak,



Ust'-Kamenogorsk prison in Kazakhstan; right, Aitken

the special rapporteur on torture for the United Nations Human Rights Council, said that “torture and ill treatment certainly goes beyond isolated instances” in Kazakhstan. Nowak said he had received “credible allegations” of beatings with fists and bottles and asphyxiation with plastic bags to obtain police confessions.

However, Aitken's work with the Kazakh prison service has impressed the World Bank, which has agreed to help fund the pilot programme.

The former cabinet minister, who was jailed in 1999 when he admitted perjury and perverting the course of justice

after lying during a libel action against *The Guardian*, has business interests in Kazakhstan and has written a glowing biography of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's autocratic president. They had discussed Aitken's work on UK prison reform during an interview for the book. Nazarbayev read the think tank report and later summoned Aitken to the presidential palace to share the ideas with his justice minister.

“President Nazarbayev was very interested in the report and asked me if I would visit one or two Kazakhstan prisons and give him a note on the possibilities for rehabilitation

programme,” said Aitken.

“As an ex-prisoner myself I had no fear of going in. In some ways they are ahead of us. I was surprised at how incredibly clean the jails were. When I was in prison I was a toilet cleaner, so I know what a difference it makes to inmates to have decent hygiene.”

Aitken served seven months of an 18-month prison sentence and has since been a vocal advocate of penal reform.

He said: “I was also surprised by what great conjugal visiting facilities they have [in Kazakhstan]. There were always lots of women and children visiting. When I told the local officials we didn't have that in the West, they looked at me as if I was the village idiot and said that if there weren't good facilities, then the prisoners' wives would divorce them.”

“Illiteracy is not nearly the problem in their prisons that it is in ours, but rehabilitation has not been a priority and I'm trying to change that.”

Aitken's recommendations, published last summer in a report by Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice, include more vocational training for prisoners and greater use of mentoring. The report also stated that prisoners should be allowed out on supervised day release to help prepare them for freedom.

Aitken visited the Kazakh



are already running workshops on welding, car repairing and metalwork, and they have initiated mentoring, day release and resettlement schemes in the communities around the four prisons concerned. All these ideas are championed in our report.”

Aitken will accompany a team of experts from the World Bank to inspect the trial in May.

“The prison service in the UK tends to think of reasons not to make changes,” he said. “They are quite risk-averse and inert. But in Kazakhstan, once someone at the top says, ‘Let's do this’, everyone gets on with it.”