

FEATURE

Accept your sentence and don't be cocky

Few people have had such a spectacular fall from grace over the last 20 years as Suffolk-raised former cabinet minister Jonathan Aitken. Now the author of a new report on supporting ex-offenders has talked to **PAUL GEATER** about his journey from Halesworth school boy to life as a campaigner for prisoners, via the House of Commons and Belmarsh Prison.

Jonathan Aitken is a man whose whole life seemed to crash down around him during a four-year period in the mid-1990s.

The former Orwell Park schoolboy and junior reporter on the EADT had gone from being a cabinet minister in 1995 to a guest of Her Majesty at Belmarsh Prison four years later.

His well-publicised downfall came after he launched a libel action against the Guardian and Granada Television over claims of inappropriate deals with Middle Eastern businessmen.

However as soon as he was released after seven months of an 18-month sentence for perjury in early 2000 it became clear he had accepted his fate and was prepared to start a new phase in his life.

Mr Aitken remains a public figure – he has recently published a report on mentoring ex-offenders for the think tank The Centre for Social Justice, a body that has the ear of several government ministers.

And he has helped those who are preparing to go to prison to prepare for the ordeal they face.

Mr Aitken spoke about the moment he knew the game was up and that he would probably end up behind bars – and how he accepted that from the very start.

The libel trial was going well for him. About two thirds of the way through, it seemed as if his case was very strong and was likely to be victorious.

Then the Guardian produced some documents proving his then wife could not have paid a hotel bill in Paris.

"That was a devastating blow to the fabricated story.

"I was absolutely bowled out,

middle stump by the new evidence so within 24 hours of that I could see that the libel case was lost and within 24 hours of that the newspapers were full of 'Aitken should be prosecuted for perjury' and I could see that this was going to happen and I thought there was an odds-on chance of going to jail.

"I did wait until I was charged and that took nine months and as soon as I had been charged I made a confession statement.

"I accepted my guilt and I accepted that my life was going to change beyond all recognition – all within a day or two of the new evidence being presented in the original trial."

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Accepting his guilt and settling into prison life had been crucial – those who allow bitterness and a sense of injustice to consume them are seen as serving a double sentence by fellow inmates.

Since his release from prison in early January 2000, Mr Aitken has helped mentor about 12 ex-offenders, including one who lives in the Ipswich area and is making a fresh start in life.

He has also helped many people



■ Jonathan Aitken at home this week

Picture: PAUL GEATER

who are facing the possibility of a prison sentence as they await the decision of the court. "I always say 'accept your sentence and don't be at all cocky' whatever they have done. Go with the flow and you'll be all right."

He added: "I was the first MP to have been sent to prison for about 20 years and my rare status has been overtaken by events. About nine MPs and peers have been sentenced since.

"All but one of the MPs who has been sentenced over the expenses scandal came in for a cup of coffee. I think the thought is that prison is going to be the most terrible experience and who can I get any tips from?"

"I must see about half a dozen people a year in this position." Mr Aitken's report "Meaningful Mentoring" calls for the appointment of 15,000 volunteer mentors to work with ex-offenders

to try to reduce the re-offending rate.

It sounds like a large number – but Mr Aitken believes it should be easily achievable because there is a substantial number of people who do want to help offenders.

However there would need to be a change throughout the prison service – English and Welsh jails lag behind their Scottish counterparts when it comes to rehabilitation.

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FEATURE



■ Disgraced Former Tory Minister Jonathan Aitken when he left Elmley prison in 2000. Mr Aitken walked free from the Prison after serving seven months of a 17 month sentence for perjury and perverting the course of justice.

Picture: PA



■ The disgraced former Cabinet Minister Jonathan Aitken with his son William (left) his daughter Alexandra, and his mother Lady Penelope Aitken, on their way to Christmas Mass Saturday 25 December 1999 during his six-day leave from prison.

Picture: PA

Aitken talks about why prisoners abscond

During the seven months Mr Aitken was locked up, he was in three prisons which gave him an insight into how inmates cope.

One mystery is why prisoners who have been moved to an open prison like Hollesley Bay prior to release abscond and face being sent back to a closed jail.

He served part of his sentence in Stamford Hill open prison - and was working with three others who then absconded.

He said there could be several reasons - but one stood out.

"Why do people abscond? The

biggest single reason is to avoid paying their drug debts. The drugs flow through the prison and people build up debts on tick.

"Some of those coming towards the end of their sentence have an enormous sum by prison standards, about £35, can't pay it and people start getting quite nasty with them if they haven't paid it.

"So about a month before they are going to be released they abscond in the hope of getting out of paying their drug debt."

There are other reasons for absconding - some leave because

they cannot stand being away from their family any longer, and some can be for very trivial reasons.

Mr Aitken said one prisoner absconded from Stamford Hill for three months during the summer because he wanted to visit racecourses.

At the end of the summer he gave himself up, was given an extra 28 days on his sentence, and was soon moved back to open prison.

There were also some inmates who had difficulty adjusting to the more relaxed life of an open prison after years in a high-security jail.



Jonathan Aitken's history

Jonathan Aitken was born in 1942, and his family moved to Halesworth at the end of the Second World War. About 10 years later, the family moved to Playford Hall near Ipswich and Mr Aitken went to Orwell Park school before attending Eton.

He then went to Oxford University and became a well-known journalist in the 1960s. He covered wars in Vietnam and Biafra before returning to Britain and becoming a television journalist in Yorkshire.

He stood for the Conservatives in Meriden in the general election of 1966, losing narrowly. His attempt to stand in the 1970 election was thwarted by a court case at the Old Bailey when he was acquitted under the Official Secrets Act of sending

photocopied documents about the Biafran war to the press and a Tory MP.

Mr Aitken was elected MP for Thanet in Kent in 1974, and represented the area in parliament until he lost the seat in the Labour landslide of 1977.

He was never made a minister by Margaret Thatcher, but John Major made him Minister of State for Defence and then Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 1994.

However, he resigned the following year to fight a libel case after the Guardian and Granada Television reported his links with Saudi businessmen.

The collapse of the libel trial in 1997 led to the perjury case in 1999.

He admitted the charge and was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment in June 1999. He was released in January 2000.

After leaving prison he returned to Oxford to study theology - and since then he has become a well-known campaigner for reform of the penal system and support for ex-offenders.

He works with 11 charities working in this sector, and has done extensive work on the subject for the Centre for Social Justice.

He is also a regular public speaker - last year he had 70 speaking engagements - and continues to work as a writer and freelance journalist.

His book "Margaret Thatcher, Power and Personality" published a few months after her death last year was critically acclaimed.

Jonathan Aitken's links with the county



Jonathan Aitken's family moved to Halesworth towards the end of the war and he went to a small primary school in the town.

He then went to Orwell Park School at Nacton, (above) a period in his life that he looks back on with great fondness.

During the mid-50s the family moved to Playford Hall, near Ipswich, and at this time Mr Aitken's father Sir William was Conservative MP for Bury St Edmunds.

While the family lived at Playford, Mr Aitken got his first taste for journalism - and his first wage packet - at the EADT where he worked for three summers as "assistant tennis and funeral correspondent."

He said: "It sounds like a strange combination, but there was this chap who always signed his articles 'Double Fault' and that was what he

was known as in the office.

"During the winter he did funeral reports full time, and in the summer I would help out either covering the tennis if he had an important funeral, or doing the funeral if he wanted to go to the tennis."

After three summers of this, Mr Aitken's parents felt it was time for him to do some "harder" work and arranged for him to spend the summer as an assistant housemaster at Hollesley Bay which was then a centre for young men doing Borstel training.

He said: "I was living with them in a large dormitory and the experience stood me in good stead later in life."

He retained strong links with the county. His father, who died in 1964, and his mother who died in 2005 are both buried in Playford church yard. He regularly visits friends in Suffolk.

■ (Above L-R) Jonathan Aitken father, William T Aitken. Orwell Park School. Jonathan Aitken, 1966. Jonathan Aitken and his new bride Elizabeth Harris, St Matthew's Church Westminster.

Picture: Archant and far right PA