



## Forget Jacqui Smith. Prisoners need to do a day's labour Jonathan Aitken

**J**acqui Smith may need a whitewash job but the fuss about a couple of day-release prisoners painting her house is not justified.

Yes, it was a misjudgment to allow a former Home Secretary to benefit from decorating work done under the prison service's ROTL (released on temporary licence) scheme. But this one-off incident is merely a bad example of a good idea. If the Ministry of Justice is serious about its rehabilitation revolution, we must expand the programme of community work by low-risk prisoners.

ROTL is a success. Every weekday about 1,800 inmates are released from jails around the country to do local job placements. The conditions are strict and the work is usually demanding and well supervised.

I mentor Keith, a prisoner on the scheme. He leaves HMP Blantyre House at 5.30am every weekday, does a two-hour commute into London where, for eight hours, he cleans a university office block in Russell Square. He is in trouble if he does not

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re-enter prison by his 6pm curfew.

The authorities monitor Keith by unannounced visits and calls to his employers. He earns the minimum wage. This leaves him about £20 a week after tax, travel and a compulsory 40 per cent deduction for Victim Support. Despite the low pay, Keith is grateful for a job that reintegrates him into an outside community.

Those who benefit from the work are often grateful too. My local church, St Matthew's, Westminster, has taken several on unpaid placements.

Sometimes they provide light relief as well as heavy lifting. On one occasion the church's Victorian safe became jammed. The priest was about to call in an expensive locksmith when he remembered the history of his ROTL prisoner and asked for advice. "No problem, vicar," came the reply, and within minutes the safe was expertly opened.

The former safe cracker came from HMP Latchmere House, Britain's largest and most effective resettlement jail. It has 200 inmates who all go into ROTL day jobs, ranging from driving London buses to staffing charity shops.

Latchmere House prisoners spend an average of 57.6 hours a week in purposeful activity, which, according to a recent Prison Service report, makes it "the best in the country for providing useful work for its inmates". It has a 6 per cent reoffending rate — also the best in the country. Sadly, Ken Clarke announced last month that it is to close. This will please the Treasury, which covets the proceeds of selling its site in Richmond, but it will be a blow to the rehabilitation revolution.

Instead of a synthetic argument about Jacqui Smith's decorating, we need a real argument about how to stop more prisoners reoffending.