

FEBRUARY 2004 - BARRED FROM VOTING

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Coalition calls for prisoners to be given the vote

A coalition of senior cross party politicians, church leaders, ex-offenders and prison reformers is calling for sentenced prisoners to be given the vote at the launch today of a new campaign organised by Unlock, the national association of ex-offenders and the Prison Reform Trust.

The Barred from Voting campaign, supported by the Liberal Democrats Shadow Home Secretary, Mark Oaten, the Conservative MP and former minister, Peter Bottomley, senior Labour MP and member of the Home Affairs Select Committee, David Winnick, the bishops of prisons for the Anglican and Catholic churches, the current and former Chief Inspectors of Prisons, the president of the Prison Governors Association and over fifty organisations, wants a review of the 134 year old law which means that when people are sentenced to prison, they are also sentenced to the additional punishment of civic death and stripped of their voting rights.

The disenfranchisement of sentenced prisoners is a relic from the nineteenth century which dates back to the Forfeiture Act of 1870. The origins of the ban are rooted in a notion of civic death, a punishment entailing the withdrawal of citizenship rights. Because sentenced prisoners still cannot vote, they face a form of internal civic exile.

A Barred from Voting campaign briefing published today states:

- The right to vote is an inalienable human right enshrined in Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- The ban is not an effective deterrent and does not protect public safety.
- It contributes to the failure of imprisonment to rehabilitate six out of ten offenders. Giving prisoners the vote would encourage them to become responsible, law abiding citizens.
- If sentenced prisoners had the vote politicians would be forced to take more of an interest in prisons and the issues raised by prisoners.
- Denying sentenced prisoners the vote undermines the government's civic renewal and active citizenship agenda by legitimizing the civic death of 95,000 people a year who are sentenced to prison.
- Minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected. Due to their over-representation in the prison population, black men are eight times as likely to be barred from voting than their white counterparts.
- The UK is one of only eight European countries automatically to disenfranchise sentenced prisoners.

Many senior managers in the Prison Service believe that voting rights and representation form part of the process of preparing prisoners for resettlement in their communities. They acknowledge that granting prisoners the right to vote would not threaten public safety.

Speaking today, Mark Oaten, Shadow Home Secretary, Liberal Democrats, said

'Britain's prisons are failing. They are failing prisoners, they are failing communities and they are failing the taxpayer. Logic tells us that if we want people to return to their communities as law-abiding citizens, we must encourage them to play a positive part in shaping their futures by their own efforts and commitment. This process must start at the beginning of the sentence, continue throughout the sentence and beyond the prison gate. It must therefore include the right to vote in elections - a fundamental right in any democracy. Unlock - The National Association of Ex-Offenders is testament to the fact that we should not write-off prisoners as civically dead, but

rather rekindle wherever possible their sense of civic responsibility and belonging.'

Peter Bottomley, Conservative MP and former minister, said:

'Ex-offenders and ex-prisoners should be active responsible citizens. Voting in prison can be a useful first step to engaging in society.'

Peter Selby, Bishop of Worcester and Bishop to HM Prisons, said:

'Denying convicted prisoners the right to vote serves no purpose of deterrence or reform. What it does is to state in the clearest terms society's belief that once convicted you are a non-person, one who should have no say in how our society is to develop, whose opinion is to count for nothing. It is making someone an 'outlaw', and as such has no place in expressing a civilised attitude towards those in prison, let alone an approach which stands a chance of civilising those who have committed crimes. You cannot, after all, civilise one whom you have exiled from civil society - and that is what depriving someone of the vote is doing.'

Sir David Ramsbotham, former HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, said:

'All citizens of the United Kingdom have the vote by right - not moral authority. Living useful and law-abiding lives includes exercising rights and abiding by laws. One of the aims of imprisonment is to help prisoners to live useful and law-abiding lives. Removing a citizen's right is an additional punishment to the deprivation of liberty awarded by the court. Denying prisoners their citizen's rights is no way to help them to live useful and law-abiding lives.'

Bobby Cummines, CEO of Unlock said:

'Six out of ten prisoners have committed crimes which require them to serve less than six months in prison, 16% will be there for their first offence and 100% are human beings. It is unfair of the Government to portray prisoners as morally deplorable people who deserve 'civic death'.

'Above all, basic human rights – such as the right to vote – are not a moral reward. They should be enshrined, protected and unchallenged by government, not used as a tool for political parties to decide who can vote for them. The ban must be overturned. It is a nonsense'

Juliet Lyon, Director of the Prison Reform Trust, said:

'If the courts had to announce each time they sent someone to prison that, in addition, they were stripping them of the right to vote then maybe the absurdity of this outdated punishment would be exposed. The ban on prisoners voting has nothing to do with preparations for resettlement and much to do with forgetting about prisons and the people in them'

Una Padel, Chair of the Penal Affairs Consortium, said:

'If we want prisoners to return to our communities as responsible law abiding people it is vital that they are able to exercise the right to vote. Only then will they have a stake in society and be recognized as citizens with a legitimate political voice.'

The Barred from Voting campaign is supported by the fifty members of the Penal Affairs Consortium and the civil liberties group, Liberty.