

DIARY

Jonathan Aitken

The last time I wrote for *The Spectator* I was sitting in a prison cell. I sent the then editor a poem called 'The Ballad of Belmarsh Gaol'. Instead of printing it in the poetry column, Frank Johnson put it on the magazine's cover. It received what is euphemistically called 'a mixed reception' — so mixed that I have never again tried my hand at verse. In those dark days 14 years ago I was wrestling with my self-inflicted agonies of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail. As I contemplated my non-future, its only certainty was that I would never again be in demand as a public speaker or as a political commentator in the media. But life is full of surprises. This autumn I am far busier in terms of speaking engagements, media appearances and column inches than I was when a Cabinet minister. This is due to an improbable combination of interests — the rehabilitation of offenders, outreach events and Margaret Thatcher.

So far this year I have given over 40 talks in or about prisons. This is because reforming the rehabilitation of offenders is a policy idea whose time has come. Having been a campaigner in this field for a decade, I am a strong supporter of Chris Grayling's Transforming Rehabilitation strategy. His plans to open up the supervision of released prisoners to a new network of companies, charities, community groups and rejuvenated probation trusts offers a real prospect of bringing down the stubbornly high reoffending rates. Recidivism by a core group of mainly young criminals costs the taxpayer up to £20 billion. Grayling's blueprint of new technology and new rehabilitation methods should make it possible to cut the reoffending rate by at least 10 per cent. That would mean a windfall for the Treasury and a transformation in the lives of thousands of offenders.

Rehabilitating offenders should be natural territory for the church. Prison chaplains do valuable work on their side of the wall, but ministries to released prisoners are few and far between. Earlier this week I emailed the General Secretary of the Diocese of London, Andy Brookes, whose remit covers 500-plus worshipping



communities. I asked him how many of them had any sort of prison ministry or outreach ministry to ex-offenders. His reply was 'we have only two parishes registered as offering practical support for ex-offenders'. The angels must be weeping.

One of those two parishes is Holy Trinity Brompton in South Kensington. Its Caring for Ex-Offenders ministry is an impressive leader in the rehabilitation field but where are the followers? At least

they are starting to emerge from the green shoots of Alpha, HTB's successful Introduction to Christianity course which has so far been completed by 10 million worldwide participants. Every September I serve as an amateur warm-up man for Alpha, giving talks in a dozen or so pubs, village halls, football grounds or church buildings. In the jargon of modern religion this is known as 'outreach speaking'. The attendees are largely non-Christian and the approach to them aims to be unchurched. The turnout at these evenings constantly surprises me. On my Alpha travels this year, the biggest audience was 650 at St Paul's Howell Hill in Surrey. I never drew half that number as a political speaker.

This autumn of hyperactivity was preceded by a summer of worry. In July my beloved wife Elizabeth suffered a severe brain haemorrhage. Holidays were cancelled and replaced by long bedside vigils in three London hospitals. As the next of kin, I was warned that five out of ten such victims die in the first four days. Another two are likely to die within the next two weeks. Of the three or so survivors, most are left with some kind of physical impairment and brain damage. Grim odds indeed. But this is a story with a happy ending. As her latest check-up confirmed, Elizabeth has come through her ordeals with no brain damage and no physical incapacity. The brilliant team of NHS neurosurgeons, neurointerventionists and specialist nurses at the Charing Cross Hospital saved her life. Perhaps the power of prayer had something to do with it too.

So far the reviews for my new biography *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality* have exceeded expectations. My daily round of media interviews, literary festivals and book signings are great fun. But an audience of over 400 at Ilkley last Sunday produced one tricky question about the Lady's humour, which could be unintentional. I told them the tale of how she once complimented Fergus Montgomery for looking exceptionally well groomed. He explained that he had just been to the hairdresser. With a straight face Margaret responded: 'I expect you had a blow job.' Laughter in the House!



2 Course menu
£22.50

3 Course menu
£26.50

Available from Monday to Friday
12:00–15:00
and
18:00–19:00

45 Tothill Street
London SW1H 9LQ
T: 020 3301 1400
E: reservations@blueboardlondon.com
www.blueboardlondon.com