

MPs flock to prison debate

Three of Parliament's most colourful characters were on hand to see prisoners discuss how much they should be paid



High-powered line-up: John Bercow, the Rev Jonathan Aitken, Diane Abbott and Jose Aguiar



Raymond Smith

Prison Chapels are appropriate places to sit and ponder the big questions in life, and that is what I was doing one Wednesday in October. I was wondering what the collective noun for Members of Parliament might be. We know about flocks of birds, murders of crows, but given "parliament" is the group name for owls, it cannot be that. I am not inviting suggestions... they may be rude!

The reason for these aimless

thoughts is that in front of me were three long-serving Parliamentarians - two retired, one certainly not - watching 11 people from the prison holding a Parliamentary-style debate. Former House of Commons Speaker John Bercow was in the chair for the final day of an innovative course run by HMP Pentonville.

Friends in high places

First, the retired MPs. One was the Rev Jonathan Aitken, 23 years in Parliament, Defence Minister, and Chief Secretary to the Treasury, now a Chaplain at Pentonville, who devised this project. He discussed it with John Bercow,

22 years an MP including 10 years as Speaker, famously calling "Order, order." Bercow agreed to teach the classes, while Aitken arranged for Friends of Pentonville, a charity in which he is very involved, to sponsor.

The serving MP was Diane Abbott, the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, who attended to present awards. She was the first Black woman MP, and the longest serving Black MP ever. After 37 years, she is now Mother of the Commons.

Once Messrs Aitken and Bercow had agreed the concept, Jonathan approached

Jose Aguiar, Pentonville prison educator, who in turn contacted the University of Westminster, so it evolved from a good idea into an innovative course, and, as with other classes run in the prison, the group taking part included inmates and staff. I attended the first session and as I listened to their debates, I once again wondered why other prisons do not follow this model?

Rules of debate

The Chapel was crowded with families, guests, and Friends of Pentonville. Two rows of chairs in the centre faced each other. To the right of the Speaker sat the Government, to his left the Opposition. Deputy Governor David Herring welcomed everyone, saying how proud he was that Pentonville could produce such an event. Dr Randhir Auluck from the University talked through the competitors' efforts. Jose announced that after the debate, everyone would receive a certificate from the University and a £10 canteen contribution from the Friends of Pentonville. The teachers would select the best speaker, who would receive an additional £50, the runner-up £20.

Appropriately-robed Speaker Bercow explained the rules. He said the Prime Minister would get five minutes to introduce a Motion to the House; the Leader of the Opposition would have five minutes to respond; the other temporary MPs would get three minutes each to contribute; and there would be two minutes' summing-up. The audience would vote, he would keep control,

everyone would follow his rulings. The motion was: "This House believes prisoners should be paid the London living wage for work done in prison."

Prime Minister Andrew represented the Government, along with Sunil, Jamie-Blue, Darren, Gerrard, and Mohammed. The elected Leader of the Opposition, Officer Eden, was unfortunately unwell, but Senior Officer Andrew deputised, with Kamal, prison employee R'Sean, Martin, Ali, and Aleksandar.

The PM opened proceedings, saying that prisons must focus on rehabilitation, and work is vital. His government recognised that paying people £2 per week was no incentive, especially when they were making goods for sale outside. Prisoners should be encouraged to work to prepare for future life. He was heckled by rowdy opposition MPs, but refused to give way.

The Leader of the Opposition responded, accusing the PM of 'tugging heartstrings'. He asked where the money would come from to pay £13.85 per hour. Would it be the NHS? Schools? The elderly; who have already lost their winter fuel allowance? He agreed with rehabilitation, and said £2 is inadequate, but added that his party wants an hourly wage of £8, to be held back and paid to people when they are released, thus giving them funds to help them resettle.

Insults and heckles

Other speakers alternated. Insults and heckles flowed. The most vocal participants were warned by the Speaker that they risked being "named" and having to leave the Chamber, in accordance with Parliamentary rules. Others were told off for speaking whilst sitting. Lively does not do it justice.

Fun certainly does.

This was a quality debate. Statistics flew around; interruptions were sharply witty, no quarter was given. The Leader of the Opposition summed up; saying the policy would fail, whilst his proposals were practical. The PM responded by saying he had listened to the debate and suggesting a 36-month trial period. A PM who listens and compromises? It might catch on.

A vote was held, which the Government lost by 21 to 19. Perhaps because of his willingness to compromise, nobody demanded the PM's resignation... yet.

Diane Abbott congratulated everyone and apologised for her late arrival, due to her contributing to a vital Commons debate on the shooting of Chris Kaba. Andrew won first prize, with joint second prizes to Aleksandar and Ali. Aleksandar told me he spoke no English when he entered Pentonville, and here he was; runner-up.

I met a number of participants and their families. They were all buzzing. The families were proud, and the participants said their improved skills inspired confidence for their futures.

Other prisons take note. The Chaplain had an idea; a long-term friend agreed to take a leading role; a positive Education team decided to run it and teamed up with a local University to deliver; the prison agreed. That is how progress is achieved.

So back to my original question; a collective noun for MPs? For these three - one who came up with the idea, one who agreed to participate, and one who rushed across London to be present - my chosen noun is "a paragon of Parliamentarians."