



Lawyers' Christian Fellowship Newsletter

www.lawyerschristianfellowship.org

SEPTEMBER 2005

LCF Christmas Function 2005

3rd December

Our speaker will be Mr Justice Peter Young OA

Venue to be announced.



A great function for new members.

Mark your diaries now

From Parliament to Porridge LCF Breakfast with Jonathan Aitken

I enjoyed the allusion to my career as a varied one – a very delicate piece of editing. It is a pleasure to be with you. I have a memory from the height of my legal dramas of being cross examined by George Carman QC in the High Court. He was grilling me on why some twenty eight years earlier I had had a contract drafted, for the sale of a business to some Arab businessmen, by a country solicitor instead of the sort of people like himself and the great law firms of London. He pressed me on this and apart from the country solicitor being a friend of mine the only other explanation I could give was that in those days I did not know many lawyers, and then I looked round for a second at this court room packed with my solicitors, junior counsel, my senior counsel, the Guardian's, Granada Television's counsel, and goodness knows who else and there must have been 35 lawyers in Court and I said "It hasn't been my problem since". This gave rise to one of the few moments when there was laughter in court in the middle of rather black dramas.

I must admit I was never expecting to be cross-examined by lawyers again but today is obviously an exception and I am very pleased indeed to be with you in Sydney.

I thought what I would do today is try and explain, in a rather personal kind of way, why I am supporting and spend most of my voluntary time supporting these two organisation who brought me to Australia – Prison Fellowship and Alpha. In order to explain this I thought the way I would do it would be to pick out a number of scenes, you may call them video clips, of my recent dramas. On the first hearing or imagi-

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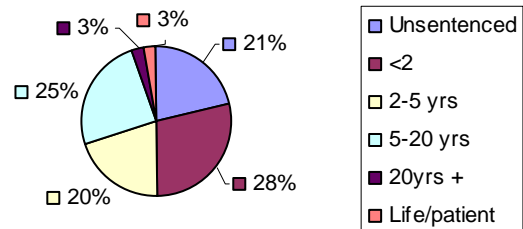
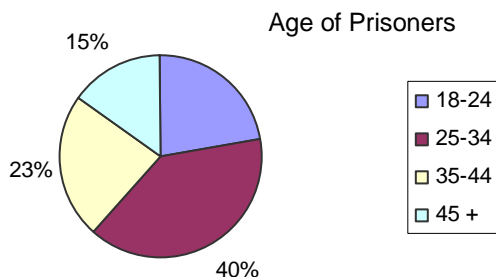
Our Prison Population

Jonathan Aitken offered a number of observations regarding the prison population of England. Is the NSW population much different? Not really, as the following statistics illustrate.

Length of Sentence

Male 93.4%
Female 6.6%

Prior imprisonment (including remand) 70.7%



Source NSW Inmate Census "Inmates in Correctional Sentences 2004"

nary viewing, you may think these scenes are somewhat disconnected but I think you will get the point as I go on, that they add up to a pretty good explanation of why I think Alpha and Prison Fellowship are so special and why I think all of us should support them in whatever way we can.

My first video clip I will call the day I went to prison — and that is a colourful and dramatic opening video and it begins at about 10:30am on Tuesday 28 June 1999. That day I stepped out of a car on the steps, more or less or close to the steps, of the central criminal court - the Old Bailey. Getting out of the car with me was Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship who had actually been a personal friend for many years and had become a much deeper and closer friend. As we got out, the allegedly seven hundred, according to the press, representatives of the national and international media who had been pinned back, by a somewhat inadequate number of police officers, suddenly surged forward and knocked over the barriers and charged and sort of surrounded us both in a turbulent melee and as we struggled to get up the steps to the Old Bailey I remember hearing Chuck Colson's new England twang saying "this is worse than Watergate". He knew what he was talking about because Chuck Colson had had a career trajectory not dissimilar to mine — he is a thousand times better man than me, but nevertheless he too had fallen from a great height of politics, he too had gone to gaol (over Watergate) and had come out and turned in the direction of Christian work and prison ministry. Anyway I got inside the court room and again the court room was packed with journalists and I remember the court warder suddenly trying to behave in a very kindly and pleasant way to me. The court warder came over and said, pointing to the dock "That's the dock Mr Aitken. Do you realise it is the dock of court number one the famous one, that is where we had (sort of becoming like a tourist guide), the great train robbers, the Kray brothers and now you.

I was not in that famous dock for very long. All that had to happen was for me to be sentenced. I had pleaded guilty to charges of perjury rising out of a civil libel case so the judge simply sentenced me in the time honoured phraseology you know so well — judges use on these occasions. "The sentence of the court is that you will serve eighteen months imprisonment. Take him down." It was an ominous sentence, even though I was expecting it and I thought it was fair. I just had a poignant moment, fleeting moment to be able to blow a kiss to my four teenage children sitting in the well of the court and my 88 year old mother and then off I set down the steps of the dock. I then went down several underground flights of stairs until I reached a kind of underground holding area where I was put into handcuffs and shoved into a prison van or sweat box as prisoners call it and driven off in my case with about twenty others, who were being jailed in other courts in the Old Bailey building. I was driven to Her Majesty's Prison Belmarsh which is Britain's

highest security prison. Goodness knows why I was put there but I was. It is known in the jargon of prisoners as a "tough nick". So it proved as I got there I will never forget the gauntlet of various stern looking prison officers, some of them with truncheons and some of them with Alsations barking on leads. We got inside and we were all put in what is called "the cage" which is the name for the reception cell about the size of this room. Business was quite brisk at Belmarsh. There were about 50-60 of us in the cage and a lot of the guys going really wild with anger and despair at the sentences they had received. I will never forget one young man just putting his head down and charging into the bars of the cage until it split open and blood poured all over the place, and I will never forget a young man trying to escape, which is a pretty counterproductive enterprise if you are starting from the heart of an iron barred enclosure in Britain's highest security prison. It took six warders to overpower him and it was quite a rowdy difficult afternoon to put it mildly. We were going through a process known as induction. I think the word induction only survives in institutional Britain in two places — Her Majesty's Prison Service and the Church of England and the rituals are rather different and in prison, when prisoners get inducted, there is none of the gentle stuff of when vicars get inducted, strip searching, mug-shooting, delousing, fingerprinting, getting fitted out with very ill fitting clothes. A pretty rough and ready afternoon.

Just in case you think I am laying it on a bit thick I will

He brought them out
of darkness and the
deepest gloom & broke
away their chains.



Psalm 107:14

lighten the mood with the one humorous touch that happened during induction which came when I was let off of my handcuffs to see the prison psychiatrist. To get the humour of this moment you have to remember that, thanks to those many journalists outside the court room, my sentencing had not gone unnoticed by this time by the great British public. But it had gone unnoticed by the prison psychiatrist, he was just having a busy day and quite reasonably enough treated me as if I was just another prisoner in front of him trying to find out whether or not I was suicide risk. In order to check me out he read out a bog standard list of questions — "Name?", "Number?", "Date of birth?", "Next of kin?" "Does your next of kin know you are in prison?". The question after that was "Does anyone other your next of kin know you are in prison?". So I gave him a smile, a wry smile, and said "Matter of fact, perhaps now between 15-20 million people know I am in prison". The psychiatrist did not pick this up at all as a humorous touch — his eyes narrowed rather

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severely and he said "You mean to say that you think that 10 million people know you are in prison." and I nodded, Then his tone became gentler and indeed more clinical as he said, "May I ask you have you ever suffered from delusions?". Well my delusions were getting shed pretty fast that day and an hour or so later I was shoved into my cell. I will not forget the sound of that huge steel prison door clanging shut. That moment I really realised I am in gaol. I guess that is where the word the slammer probably comes from.

I then thought, it has been a long day and tough day but I am here now and at least I will be able to get a good night's sleep – no such luck. The prisoners of Belmarsh, unlike the psychiatrist at Belmarsh, had all been tuning into the media that day and they knew exactly who and where I was when I arrived and so on. My left and right cell neighbours helped the knowledge further by precisely identifying the location of my cell in a sort of sing song chant which was soon joined in by prisoners all over the gaol including other cell blocks across the exercise yard. They all began this chant which got noisier and noisier and I note we are at a breakfast organised by Christian lawyers, and I think I will spare you the fruity details of this chant. The gist of it was that expletive deleted Aitken has now arrived in cell 321b in cell block C. Tomorrow morning lads lets expletive deleted do this or that to his expletive deleted parts of his anatomy so that we can show him what we think of expletive deleted conservative cabinet ministers. That was gist of the chant. I make light of it now but I assure you at the time I was really scared – nothing had prepared me for the venom and viciousness and implied violence of this chant. So I did the only thing I thought I could do that would be the slightest help or use in the circumstances which was that I knelt on that prison floor and said a prayer.

I will now switch to another video clip. In my imagination or in your imagination – the second video clip I will call "How I got started on this road to where I said a prayer". I was not in the normal habit of saying prayers. I am going back to the time just before I was unmasked in a civil libel case in high drama with George Carman and others cross examining me. Suddenly, after we thought we had almost won the case, a new piece of dramatic evidence was produced which proved I had told a lie about one aspect of the case which should have been peripheral and which cleverly, as QCs can, had been made central to my credibility as a witness. It was the question of who had paid an \$1800 hotel bill at the Ritz hotel in Paris. Again for the reason of rather peripheral political embarrassment, I had covered this up and told a lie about it and kept on camouflaging it and had to keep the camouflage going which meant having to lie on oath about it – utterly foolish, utterly stupid. Suddenly I was unmasked and my world fell apart into small pieces as I was then unmasked as an incredible witness – someone who had lied on oath and of course there was a media fire storm. I think Hitler was treated rather better in the days immediately after this was revealed. I was sitting very miserable at home realising that the whole life I

had known was over. Indeed a campaign had been started in all the newspapers to have me prosecuted for perjury. In the middle of all this misery my door bell ring and a guy I hardly knew, a distant acquaintance, the sort of person I would hardly have given the time of day to normally – came in and said "I know you are having a terrible time – I read all these things about you in the paper. Can I come in and pray for you?"

When a few minutes later I realised what he meant by this was "Can I come in and pray for you and pray out loud with you?" I would rather have gone to the dentist without an anaesthetic, because I used to belong to the church reticent wing of Anglicanism. If I had any religious thoughts at all, it was that religion is entirely private matter and I was, in those days best what could be called a Sunday Christian - a half Christian which I now know is about as useful as being half pregnant. I had a very tangential relationship with the Church and the Lord, but in that sort of trouble you will try some new things, so I did let him pray out loud for me. It wasn't too bad. He said "I think you need regular prayer support, when can I come back?". I tried to put him off, but his will was stronger than mine, and he came back the next day with a guy I did know rather better because he was an MP, and had been Margaret Thatcher's principal private secretary Michael Alison, a respected senior back bencher in the House of Commons, and he produced a fax from Chuck Colson. Now I knew Chuck Colson long before I was in any trouble. I knew Chuck Colson because I had written a book on president Nixon, a biography of Nixon, and Colson had been a wonderful source to me in writing that. Colson's letter in effect said "I feel for you, I know you are utterly shattered as I have seen you quoted but your life needn't be in ruins, your life needn't be shattered if only you will do the kind of things I did at the time of Watergate. Turn to the Lord in repentance and penitence and allow to come round you praying partners"

Because I respected Colson and what not, and I knew he was doing some kind of good work in prison – I wasn't sure what it was (I thought it was probably sending food parcels to prisoners or something like that). I took this letter seriously. It was one of the few nice letters I had at that time. So I started to allow this little prayer group to get round me. If any of you have not done so I recommend what is sometimes called small group ministry – praying together regularly, reading the bible regularly with a small group of trusted friends. It is a wonderful way of deepening and developing your spiritual journey. But my spiritual journey was really rocky at this stage. It seemed to get even rockier after three of four of these sessions. One of these guys said, "We think you should do an Alpha course". I said "What's that?" and when I heard what it was, and indeed when I was shown, somewhat inaccurate newspaper articles about it, I said "I am not going to do that. I don't need an Alpha course, - an introduction to Christianity. I have been going to church on and off (about as regularly as I think this group meets) – every so often rather intermittently, and happy clappy, twanging guitars and hurrah Henries and Henriettas from Kensington all calling

down the Holy Spirit isn't me at all. I do not want to go". Almost out of good manners to these friends of mine I did go along and I was pleasantly surprised almost immediately how good the Alpha course seemed to be—the quality of the teaching, the interesting clever and congenial people, not a whole lot of cheesy Christians doing the course alongside me. So I was impressed, but I was still pretty detached from it. And every Thursday I said "I do not think I will come next Thursday if I have get a better invitation". My postbag was not full of invitations at this stage so I kept going. About the fourth or fifth week the course was not given by Nicky Gumble, the well known Alpha chaplain and head of the clergy team at Holy Trinity Brompton, but by an attractive young woman in a mini skirt. I always remember that when her talk began I was much more interested in her mini skirt than I was in her message. But as she got underway I started to suddenly realise that this was a talk on probably the most important subject in the world. The title of the talk was "How do we pray?". It really got to me this talk, both the biblical background to prayer, and suggestions about prayer. There were very specific ideas for prayer and discipline and structures for prayer. I said to myself as I went home that night – "that woman really got to me with that talk – I think I will give this a try". Almost immediately it started to change my prayer life, which had been pretty sketchy up to that point and to change my whole life. I stuck with the Alpha course – I found it to be a tremendous journey and all sorts of things happened which I have not got time to tell you about. Because of the Alpha course I experienced a sort of process of deepening in my spiritual journey.

Some Christian speakers can tell you how they had a blinding flash on the road to Damascus and everything changed at that one moment. With me it was very different. I had a much more uncomfortable and difficult ride -stumbling, falling, sinning, backsliding, doubting – all kinds of negatives, yet despite all those negatives, rather like someone who is on a train journey going across European countries during the night you do not actually know the precise moment when you cross the frontier but you do know when you have arrived in the new territory of a real and committed faith. I had done this thanks to the Alpha course and thanks to other mentors and guiders and, most of all, thanks to God and His forgiveness. I had done this about nine months before I went to prison. It wasn't a sort of crutch or comfort conversion. It was much more I found a series of challenges. To this day I think of myself much more a failed again Christian than a born again Christian. But anyway I got there—I had real faith.

That is why, going back now, changing the video clip again, on that night of that prison expletive deleted chant I knelt down and said a prayer. And the prayer worked to this extent - immediately it sent me into a deep and peaceful sleep despite all the terrifying sounds around me and I woke up the next morning feeling life wasn't as bad as it sounded the night before. Then I was alerted by the great prison cry of "Unlock everybody out!" and we all had to stand out on

the wing and be counted. I remembered that the guys who had been the noisiest vocalists in the chant were my left and right cell neighbours so I started to tremble a little - only to find they were rather friendly, having been so hostile the night before. "Morning" they said "Hope you slept well. Sorry about last night". "Nothing personal" one of them said. "We were just letting off steam. We were on the tackle (which means on the drugs, which a huge percentage of British prisoners are). You are one of us, come have a rosey – (a cup of tea)" I started to get into the community of my wing – about 300 prisoners. Belmarsh has about 3000 prisoners altogether.

As I started to become accustomed to the landscape of prison I saw one or two things that surprised me a lot. One was how young everybody seemed to be and that was an accurate calculation – I now know that the average age of a British prisoner is 23 which means that there are an awful lot of very young people washing around in the system, including teenagers, in a big London prison. The second thing I noticed was how readily drugs were available and how they affected life. On my first weekend in Belmarsh prison I felt I was in a Moroccan sook rather than an English gaol with so many people spinning around on these highly scented substances.

Continued in our next newsletter.

Jonathan Aitken received a law degree from Cambridge University before going on to be a journalist, a banker, a member of the House of Commons and Privy Council. A member of John Major's cabinet he was sentenced to 18 months for perjuring himself in a libel case he brought against the Guardian newspaper. Jonathan recently spoke at an LCF breakfast. His two volumes of autobiography "Pride and Perjury" and "Porridge and Passion" are published by Continuum Books.

If you want a copy of the talk on CD please forward a cheque in favour of the LCF to the editor.

Jonathan was also interviewed by Rachael Kohn for Radio National's The Spirit of Things and this can be listened to or downloaded at :

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s1438764.htm>

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