



Member of the CJA

7 October 2008

TITAN PRISONS

I am writing in response to the open letter of 28 August, to which you were a signatory. Many of those who signed the letter have also submitted more detailed responses to the consultation on the "Titan" prisons. I am grateful for all of these.

I want to take time to consider all the responses before coming to a final view, which will of course be made public. Without pre-empting this, I thought it would be helpful if I commented on some of the key points made in the letter.


Central to the arguments made in the letter was the statement that our proposals "to build three Titans, each housing around 2,500 prisoners, would cement this country's position as the prison capital of Western Europe, while squandering billions of pounds of taxpayers' money...". This statement conflates two issues – first, the overall scale of our prison expansion plans, and second, how this should best be met. On the first, the plan in the Carter Report (5 December 2007) which has been accepted by the Government, is for the number of prison places to rise to around 96,000 net by 2014. The case made for this increase is strong. Whilst the latest prison population projections suggest that demand for prison places may end up being a little less than 96,000 by 2014 I think it remains prudent to plan for this level given that there may be unexpected new pressures. But our plans already allow for the closure of some unsatisfactory older prison premises, and were there good evidence in a few years time that demand would be lower and stable for the then foreseeable future, it would be open to the government of the day to take out more unsuitable, time expired accommodation. But personally I doubt this will be the case. The first duty of any Government is the protection of the public. We have a strong record in this regard. We are the first administration since the war to have presided over a sustained reduction in crime, well over 30%, and there is little doubt in my mind that the 30% increase in prison places over the same period has played a part in this.

Comments about the size of our prison population relating to this European analogy do not really advance the argument. The UK has long been at or near the top of the European tables per 100,000 population, but not markedly so: and we still have five times fewer prisoners per 100,000 than does the USA.

Prison is necessary for serious, dangerous and persistent offenders. Those who claim that there should be fewer in prison now, or in the future, do have a duty to say how this could be achieved. In respect for example, of which offences or which categories of offenders should prison sentences be reduced, or abandoned altogether? It would be helpful to have your specific views on this. I recognise the importance of non-custodial sentences – which is why we've invested so much in them and improved their enforcement. But aside from serious and dangerous offenders who have to be jailed immediately, even for a first conviction, those in prison for short sentences (less than 12 months) have on average served several custodial and non-custodial sentences. Persistent offenders have almost always previously been given non custodial sentences, but have still failed to end their offending. The implication of your letter is that the courts should simply sit on their hands in the face of breaches or re-offending.

If, on the other hand, you accept that the prison population will rise, then the debate comes down to how best to provide the extra places needed. The proposals on which we are consulting have been brought forward as the best available way of meeting this need for places, close to prisoners' homes, and with right regimes. We already have encouraging experiences of prison complexes – for example, the Isle of Sheppey (2200 in total). These are no single regime 'warehouses', nor have such 'warehouses' ever formed any part of the Government's proposals.

But on this issue of how we meet the projected demand, I shall consider carefully all of the submissions before coming to a final view.

Yours sincerely,


JACK STRAW