Report on my Meeting between Ruth Cadbury MP, Shadow Minister for Prisons, Probation & Parole 14-02-2024 Melanie Jameson, (Clerk of QICJ)

Ruth's comments are italicised and highlighted

My meeting with Ruth took place on Wednesday February 14, at her Westminster Office in Portcullis House. She asked first about my professional background (which encompasses raising awareness, writing guidance and identifying & supporting adults with Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia and autism in CJ contexts).

When asked about the general election, Ruth thought it quite likely that it would fall on May 2, to coincide with mayoral elections. This would entail an imminent move to 'purdah' and the 6 week period in which the opposition has access to the civil service. *The party Manifesto is now being tweaked internally.*

I had provided an outline of the areas we hoped to cover (attached), drawing on guidance from QICJ's Justice Interest Group. As advised, I began with ways in which QICJ might be able to contribute to Labour's CJ work. This included establishing our credentials, in terms of membership expertise, and moving on to our history of convening disparate groups, careful listening and current networks – such as Churches Together in Britain and Community Chaplaincy.

It is important for prisoners who have come to faith to connect with a church 'through the gate' to aid (re)integration and help restore community relations. We spoke of support for such schemes, which would include the convening of the necessary services, and pilots in devolved regions such as Manchester.

Moving on to two key issues, I stressed our belief that a trauma-informed approach is essential across the board, due to the frequency of **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACEs) on subsequent behaviour *(this was noted by RC)* , and secondly, the saving, in terms of human misery and billions of pounds linked to reoffending, by engaging in **preventive work**.

Would Labour shift away from **punitive rhetoric** - on retribution and discard the false image of deterrence – instead, look at evidence-based solutions from the UK, Europe and beyond? *The response was 'we need to say what will help us get elected', but RC has already made contact with the leading CJ charities.* (No comment on implementing ground-breaking reviews inc. Corston, Taylor, Lammy & Coates)
At this stage I introduced the paper from Fergus McNeill presented to the UN Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Congress, Japan 2021: *Reducing Reoffending & Enabling Rehabilitation*, picking out key points, and was asked by RC to forward it.

The last general issue related to **court backlogs**, regarded by combined Inspectorates as the biggest on-going issue, with a knock-on effect on prisons. I asked if courts closed by Tories could be reopened*; Ruth flagged up the shortage of criminal barristers as a key factor.*

Our conversation then moved to Ruth's three areas of Prisons, Probation and Parole.
Regarding prisons: long-standing overcrowding and projected further population increases were a major concern – especially to the Governors and prison officers. I voiced my belief that certain groups should not be in mainstream prisons, such as the mentally ill, and a note was made of my suggestion that they should be moved into bespoke prisons (as happens for some sex offenders), thus freeing up spaces which would allow a few

prisons to be repurposed. *Response: there is a shortage of clinicians* – this applies to all HMPPS.
When I mentioned the short training that our prison officers receive, compared with elsewhere in Europe (something they are keen to remedy) *Ruth thought that this might be an example of 'low hanging fruit' which could be addressed early on.*
Next: it seemed wrong that people with addictions are sometimes sent to prison as the only way of accessing help, rather than being treated in the community *(no comment)*.

The ongoing **scandal of IPP** was raised, with Labour being asked to reconsider the careful recommendations of the Justice Committee and the amendments on IPP in legislation that is currently in progress. Is the Release Test, as currently phrased, fair? *Ruth was wary of re-sentencing because of the impact on victims would prefer a more efficient Parole Board to reassess those in prison.* I gave her my copy of the MoJ reply to MfS/QiB from the Minister for Sentencing, Gareth Bacon MP.

We strongly feel that the **Probation Service** is badly under-resourced and has been hollowed out to a mere risk management agency (Fergus' wording), rather than focusing on (re)integration. It should be organised locally (as before) so the Service can be much more responsive to local needs and work closely with the local network of third sector organisations. Restorative Justice is under-used despite the positive evidence-base.

Alarm bells rang for us when Dominic Raab sought to influence the internal decisions of the Parole Board. Although this is mainly reversed, we have been made aware of attempts (within the Victims & Prisoners Bill) to control the composition of the Parole Board and allow the Secretary of State to remove the chair, which undermines independence.

Finally, I felt it was important to bring in the direct **voice of lived experience**, both of prisoners and staff. This comprised the final page of the meeting notes, summarised here.

Question posed to a group of male long-term prisoners:
"If there's one thing you could change to improve the prison system, what would it be?".

Aware that there was so much, the consensus seemed to be 'making UK prisons more like Norwegian ones, providing opportunities for real rehabilitation, offering conjugal rights as an incentive for sustained good behaviour.
Others agreed and said the Scandinavian approach was humane and ours is not. 'If people are treated like animals, they'll behave like animals.'
Access to good legal aid/advice also came up.
A younger man who'd come into an adult prison aged 17, saw this as effectively 'a school of criminality for the next 20 years, surrounded by dysfunctional relationships.' How can he learn to be a better person?
Their conclusion 'There are so many ways to lose hope. '

A contribution from a member of staff pointed out that, in her establishment, there were no in cell phones so there are 6 phones between 80-90 men on a wing with limited time out of cell, how difficult it is to phone when family/kids are at home. Mobile rates are extortionate. It is the cause of a lot of stress.
Half of the accommodation still has no in-cell toilet or wash basin, requiring slop out 2x per 24hrs. There are no plans to do anything about this. It's too expensive.
'We have water coming through roofs, ceilings falling down and repairs are not done for years. The buildings are not fit to live and work in'.

Ruth was given the latest two editions of our QICJ newsletter.