

David Gauke: Disrupt drugs trade in prisons and foster rehabilitation

David Gauke, Secretary of State for Justice, speaking today at Conservative Party Conference at The ICC, Birmingham, said:

(Check against delivery)

“It was an enormous privilege, earlier this year, to be appointed Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor.

I am the first solicitor to be Lord Chancellor. I am also the first Lord Chancellor from my home town of Ipswich since Cardinal Wolsey in the 16th century.

Admittedly, it didn't end well for him. But then again, he had to undertake a very complex negotiation with a supranational, European bureaucracy!

Being Justice Secretary is such an honour because of the type of country we are.

We are a country governed by the rule of law.

We value the role played by our independent judges.

Our individual liberty and our economic prosperity are reliant upon the fact that that is the type of country we have long been. And that must continue to be the case.

That shouldn't need saying. But when a Shadow Cabinet Minister celebrates the lawbreaking Militant Tendency Council that brought Liverpool to its knees ...

... and a Labour MP calls for an illegal General Strike...

... and, in response, the Shadow Justice Secretary stands up and claps ...

we need to make the case for mainstream values and the rule of law.

Fortunately, I have an excellent team working with me to fight for these values.

I would like to thank my ministerial team, Rory Stewart, Edward Argar and Lucy Frazer, for the fantastic work that they do.

Our whip Amanda Milling and PPSs, Peter Heaton Jones and Ranil Jayawardena provide fantastic support in the House of Commons ...

... and in the Lords, we have an outstanding team in Richard Keen as our spokesman and Charlotte Vere as whip.

I am also deeply grateful to the dedicated people who serve our justice system, whether in the courtroom or the prison landing, for what you do. Whether it be prosecuting or defending the accused, supporting victims, protecting the public or rehabilitating an offender ... our country depends upon you.

CHALLENGES AND ACTION

We were fortunate enough to hear just now from Jacob, who travelled here today to share his story with us in person.

We also saw, on the video, Ben who had a really rough life, ended up in prison and then with help from Jacob and others, turned his life around. Also we heard from Natasha Porter from Unlocked, talking about their great work attracting top talent and demonstrating the real value that prison officers bring to their roles.

And, of course, I would like to pay tribute to Iain Duncan Smith, who has long been an advocate for social justice and reform.

We want everyone to have the opportunity of a good life. That means being able to go about their lives free from crime.

Jacob and Ben both ended up in prison – despite their different backgrounds. And both of them had a choice when they were released. Return to crime? Or contribute to society as law-abiding citizens?

We need offenders to make the right choice, to reject a life of criminality and take the opportunity to work, accept responsibility and be part of society. Reforming the way that we get offenders to do that is my mission, and what I hope defines me as Justice Secretary.

Getting prisoners rehabilitated will reduce crime and ensure there are fewer victims of crime in future. It will also cut the £15bn cost that reoffending has on society.

But to do that, we also need to deal with some very real challenges facing the prisons system.

That's why this summer we announced £40 million to tackle the violence in prisons that is fuelled by the drugs trade and fight the use of illicit mobile phones by gangsters on the inside.

We have increased prison officer numbers by 3,500 – and we will continue to recruit more.

And to further crack down on drugs and violence in prison, this month we are launching a new Financial Crime Unit which will track and seize the money that criminal kingpins use to deal drugs in prison. My message to them is this: we are already blocking your phones, putting you in isolation and now we will make sure you can't access your money. Dealing drugs in prison will no longer be profitable because we will find your assets and we will seize them.

Our criminal justice system must protect the public and punish offenders. But if we want to bring down crime, we must also reduce reoffending.

That is why I launched the Education and Employment strategy, which will expand opportunities for offenders to get education and skills training, and work experience so they can get a job when they get out.

Today I can announce that:

... We have successfully opened up the market for prison education, increasing the number of potential providers from four to twelve...

... We are systematising offender training and employment in prison industries such as cooking, cleaning and maintenance across the prison estate. This builds on the success of the approach within custody and community which we have developed with organisations such as the Clink Charity.

And, we have agreed a formal partnership with the construction industry, led by CITB and Lendlease, to fill skills gaps in the industry and help more prisoners do a working day during their sentence and find work on release.

To further cut reoffending...

... We have set out our Female Offenders Strategy, using alternatives to custody when this is more effective and providing better support to many women offenders who are themselves victims of abuse and suffering from addiction or mental health issues.

... We've launched pilots to make greater use of community treatment orders that address the mental health issues or substance abuse that drives someone to criminality.

... We're making it easier for prisoners to keep in contact with their families by allowing access to number-restricted in-cell telephones.

And it's because we want to cut reoffending that we have made the case that, for minor crimes, custody should only be used as a last resort. Reoffending rates for those on short sentences are higher than for the community alternatives. Short sentences are disruptive. Offenders too often lose their jobs, lose their homes and damage their family relationships. They are more likely to commit crimes on release.

I know that there will be some who argue that this focus on alternatives to custody and rehabilitation is just 'soft justice'.

But I'll tell you this. If you've just been a victim of a crime, you're not going to take much comfort from the fact that the perpetrator just spent the last three months locked up for most of the day and was released last week with no job, no home, no hope and no chance.

Let me be clear that our community sentences should not be a soft option. That is why this Summer I announced an extra £22 million per year to improve offender supervision after they leave prison, as well as help them transition

into work.

As a Conservative, I want everyone to reach their potential. And when I meet ex-offenders like Ben and Jacob, who have taken responsibility, who have addressed their problems, learnt the lessons and turned their lives around...

I am filled with optimism – and a belief that we can do much more.

We have a duty to help turn round the lives of those who accept their responsibilities and do the right thing. Not just for their sakes. But for the sake of society as a whole, to reduce reoffending, to reduce the number of victims in the future.

That's why we have to give them the opportunity to reform. And this is especially true for young offenders. We need to ensure that we focus on turning lives round at an early stage, before it is too late.

That's why...

... We're improving the skills and training for those working in the youth justice system, including getting more graduates into the system by expanding the excellent Unlocked scheme...

... and giving governors greater flexibility as to how they commission youth education contracts.

And today I can confirm that we are spending £5 million to introduce this country's first Secure School at Medway. Secure Schools are a radical new concept that places education and healthcare at the heart of youth custody. They will be run by not-for-profit academy trusts, bringing genuine expertise, knowledge and innovation into the youth custody sector. We will be launching the application and selection process for the provider later this month. And we intend to construct more purpose-built secure schools in the coming years to further transform the youth estate.

Together this package of reforms and investment will crack down on the drugs and violence in prisons, further support offenders in turning their backs on crime and, crucially, help young offenders find a path out of criminality into education and responsibility.

The problems won't be solved overnight. But if we refuse to be deflected, if we stay focused on our vision, if we are driven by the evidence and prepared to be bold, if we are willing to embrace reform, this is an agenda that can turn round lives.

And that is what we will deliver."

ENDS

For further information, please contact the Press Office on 020 7984 8121.