

[from Michael Mates's home address]

The Rt. Hon. Kenneth Clarke, QC, MP,
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Forgive me writing out of the blue, but I have been taking an interest in prison matters recently because of two friends who have come to me identifying what they see as problems.

Mrs. Sarah Chester (who is John Peyton's daughter and who I believe has written to you) and John Dexter have both been good and conscientious prison visitors who have been dismissed for what they are told is unacceptable conduct. This is because they have, on occasion, maintained contact with prisoners after they have been released. Apparently, this is contrary to prisons' policy, although there is nothing in the handbook for official prison visitors to say so. When they asked why this was, the reply was, "because of security". It seems the fear is that they will act as conduits between ex-prisoners and those still inside – although the ease with which contraband gets into prisons (often through prison officers) makes this, to my mind, a very small risk.

But the main point they make is that it is just at that moment that prisoners are released that they are at their most vulnerable. With John Dexter, I met a young man who had recently been released from jail. He was given a small sum of money (about £90 as I recall) and that was that. He had nowhere to go, no accommodation and there was no after-care for him because he had served a short sentence. I managed to find him a job on a local estate, which is all that has prevented him from re-offending. It does seem bizarre that prison visitors should have to resort to their MP (I was in the House at the time) for help with after-care.

I enclose a summary of Mr. Dexter's efforts with prisoners over the years. It is long, but a glance will show you that this is a person who has devoted, voluntarily, a large part of his life to trying to help prisoners. That both he and Sarah Chester should be dismissed when there is a shortage of visitors seems to me to be most counter-productive.

I would be most grateful if you would have your people look at this. Perhaps there needs to be a change of policy or practice to enable people to do such sterling work in trying to help prevent ex-prisoners re-offending.

Good luck in all you do! I am following progress from the sidelines with great interest and not a little nostalgia.

With best wishes,

The Rt. Hon. Michael Mates