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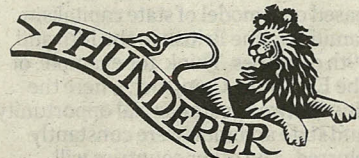
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These rioters need the discipline of a tough military jail

Jonathan Aitken

After the looting and arson come the punishments. Many will be custodial sentences. This will present the criminal justice system with a short-term problem but a long-term opportunity.

The problem is overcrowding. The prison population is at record levels with more than 85,000 inmates. The service is preparing for the expected

thousand new arrivals from the courts by doubling up in single cells and similar measures. But even if such palliatives work, more radical thinking is needed as the courts jail looters and destroyers. None of them has excuses. Some are incorrigible. Others may have explanations for their criminality that give them the potential to lead rehabilitated lives. Sorting out these individuals is the long-term challenge.

One response would be to use and learn from the most disciplined prison in Britain — the Military Corrective and Training Centre at Colchester. When I visited it some months ago there were unused facilities for 250 new prisoners. This could be useful.

Although the Ministry of Defence might resist opening the centre to civilian criminals, its staff would rise to the emergency and their example could revolutionise how we punish difficult young offenders. The centre successfully achieves its three aims of retraining, rehabilitation and resettlement for its servicemen

inmates, not by the apocryphal short sharp shock of the glasshouse era but by sustained and purposeful discipline.

An inmate's day begins at 6am and ends at 10pm. Much of this is spent in the classroom or in training workshops. The illiterates cannot opt out of education as they can in civilian prisons.

The centre focuses on training in areas such as plumbing, catering and vehicle repairing where there are jobs. The emphasis is on disciplined preparation for life in the community. In the spartan barracks-style dorms, tidiness, physical fitness and intensive training are the order of the day.

This kind of discipline has become alien to our warehouse prisons. It was not ever thus. Until 1982 young offenders were sentenced to borstal training. I experienced this in the 1960s through six weeks' work experience at HM Borstal Hollesley Bay. Our exhausting yet satisfying programme ranged from dawn runs to mucking out the stables. In those days 55 per cent of the charges did not reoffend.

The last young offender institution (YOI) to run such high-intensity training was Thorn Cross, Cheshire. Its regime was relaxed in 2000. This was a mistake, based on the progressive view that strict discipline and rehabilitation are incompatible. In fact they are two sides of the same coin. We should

Strict regimes inside must be matched by tenderness outside

bring it back, along with compulsory restorative justice.

If the Government re-created YOIs operated on these lines, tough regimes on the inside have to be matched on the outside by thoughtfulness, even tenderness, towards former offenders willing to make a fresh start.

Pre and post-release mentoring is vital. It is a process of caring and steering as a young offender is guided

into a law-abiding life. It can be supervised by the Probation Service and is best operated by experienced charities. The problem is a shortage of trained mentors. Perhaps the solidarity shown by communities in facing down looters could be channelled into volunteering for local programmes to prevent reoffending.

I have been doing voluntary mentoring for ten years. My star ex-offender is Leroy Skeete. We met as fellow prisoners in Belmarsh. He was serving a two-strike life sentence for GBH with intent. He had a long string of convictions and looked a complete no-hoper for rehabilitation.

But Leroy knuckled down to education. When he came out, Blue Sky, the ex-offender charity, gave him a steady job. He has gone straight for over three years and I am confident he will stay out of trouble. When I watched the past week's criminal disorder I thought of Leroy and said to myself: "Some of these guys will one day be rehabilitated into good citizens."