

Putting prisoners to work

Justice Secretary Ken Clarke is to tell the Conservative Conference in Birmingham today that prisoners will have to work a 40 hour week, in the hope that this will establish a habit of hard work, according to the [BBC](#). Mr Clarke is of course only talking about the prison population in England and Wales, as our own Justice Secretary Kenny McAskill is responsible for prisoners in 16 penal establishments in Scotland.

✘ HM Inspector of Prisons in Scotland, Brigadier Hugh Monro, has just published his first annual report in which he highlights the problems associated with a prison population which is not gainfully engaged in any activity. He said:-“In terms of preparing prisoners for release, I worry that the availability of programmes designed to reduce re-offending is more limited than I would like. On occasions when I visit or inspect prisons, I see too many prisoners in halls or cells rather than taking part in gainful activity. This imbalance needs to be corrected if attempts to address underlying causes of offending are to be more successful.”

But it was his predecessor, Dr Andrew McLellan, who highlighted that the problem with making prisoners work (which they are by law obliged to do) is that overcrowding in our prisons prevents such activity.

McLellan's final report as Inspector claimed that where there is overcrowding it is often the safe option simply to keep prisoners in their cells, rather than engage in sport or any other activity. He made the following observation:-“Another unhappy feature of Scotland's prisons is the amount of time spent by prisoners locked in their cells. Wherever there is a story of a workshop closed, whenever there is a visit to an empty workshop, whenever another member of staff is taken away from training prisoners to provide essential duties elsewhere,

there is an opportunity missed and there are prisoners less well equipped than they should be for returning to society. Nothing does more harm to prisoners' prospects of law-abiding living on release than lying in bed all day, doing absolutely nothing."

According to Audit Scotland it costs around £32,000 per annum to keep an inmate in a Scottish prison and according to [The Scottish Government](#) the prison population is set to rise "from 8,100 in 2009-10 to 9,600 inmates by 2018-19".

In these days of financial austerity measures it seems appropriate that the UK Justice Secretary is looking to minimise the cost of that by putting the prisoners to work, reportedly for 40 hours a week 'earning' the equivalent of the minimum wage, but perhaps the question is whether that will also happen in Scotland?