AIMS For a better birth...

Political Rhetoric and Debate

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In November 1995, Sheila Kitzinger lobbied some of the members of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, by January everyone was lobbying them!

Lord Lester of Herne Hill asked the Government: *"whether governors have discretion not to use handcuffs on women prisoners while they are suckling their infant children; and if not, why not."*

He received a reply from the Director of Services of the Prison Service:

"*...Following the publicity about the handcuffing of women during labour, a note was sent to Governors of prisons with mother and baby units clarifying the position on handcuffing of women in labour. The directive states that once the woman has been confirmed as being in labour at the hospital all restraints are to be removed. No restraints should be applied until the baby has been delivered and the mother has finished nursing the baby.*

After that, restraints will not be applied unless the Governor considers it necessary on security grounds. Medical, surgical or clinical reasons will often indicate that restraints should not be used.

The Director General has agreed to *meet with the President of the Royal College of Midwives, to discuss this further and to try to resolve any difficulties."* (Written Answers. 11 Jan 1996).

Glenda Jackson MP tabled a Early Day Motion in the House of Commons:

"*That this House deplores the Prison Service Agency practice of shackling pregnant women prisoners when in hospital for ante-natal treatment; further deems it barbaric that such women undergo this shackling when giving birth; and calls upon the Home Secretary to order that this practice should cease forthwith."*

On the 9th, 18th and 24th January the House debate the issues, following are some of the comments the MPs made:

- MR MICHAEL FABRICANT (Mid Staffordshire)
  "... we are discussing not innocent young gals but convicted criminals..there was never a question of the use of balls and chains – as one might believed if one read the press reports - but that we were talking about light Manacles?" (18 Jan 1996)
- MR PIERS MERCHANT (Beckenham)
  "...the prime responsibility of the Prison Service (is) to prevent prisoners - often dangerous – from escaping, thus protecting ordinary, innocent members of the public." (18 Jan 1996)

- MR JACQUES ARNOLD (Grevesham)
  "...the shadow Home Secretary did not once mention during his intervention that every one of those women is either a convicted criminal or has been remanded in custom by a court which considers them to be dangerous or likely to abscond, and that my constituents expect that everyone sent to prison by the courts should remain there securely?" (18 Jan 1996)
- MR ALAN SIMPSON (Nottingham South)
  "...I do not understand how a governor at the other end of a telephone line can be expected to determine whether labour has started." (18 Jan 1996)
- MS DIANE ABBOTT (Hackney, North & Stoke Newington)
  "*ordinary people ...found both preposterous and repellent... the Minister of State's proposition that, inthe last few hours before labour or when a woman is walking around in the middle of labour; she ls likely to make a bid for escape"* (18 Jan 1996)
- MRS TERESA GORMAN
  "...it is essential that even women who are pregnant must be treated from the point of view of punishment, as everybody else in our society is." (9 Jan 1996)
- MR CAMBELL SAVOURS
  "*This Is the practice of the last Century. The great body of British public opinion believes that it iswrong that pregnant women should be manacled in prison.*" (9 Jan 1996)
- MISS ANN WIDDECOMBE
  'I say once again: no woman in labour, as defined on medical advice, is secured."(9 Jan 1996)
- MISS ANN WIDDECOMBE
  'I can only state again that we remove restrains when treatment has commenced or, in the case of pregnant women, when labour is confirmed... She was secured only when she entered the public areasof the hospital when she was not in labour" (9 Jan 1996)
- MISS ANN WIDDECOMBE
  "*We have made it clear that women in labour will not be secured and that it has never been our policy for them to be so secured."* (9 Jan 1996)
- MRS AUDREY WISE
  'Will the Minister ask the Royal College of Midwives to conduct a private seminar for her about some of the basic facts of childbirth: She will learn that there is no single second when someone can say that a woman has gone into labour. The possession of forms to be filled in does not alter the biological facts" (9 Jan 1996)
- MR MICHAEL HOWARD
  "*...the Prison Service has never intended women to be restrained while in labour; as far as I am aware.*" (18 Jan 1996)
- MRS ALICE MAHON
  "*Given that the Home Secretary has finally been dragged, kicking and screaming, to reverse the odious practice of shackling prisoners, is it not time new to utter one little word to the woman who have been so degraded and to their absolutely innocent babies: ls lt not time to say sorry?*" (18 Jan 1996)

Asked by John Snow on Channel 4 News (5 Jan 1996) whether any pregnant woman had ever escaped. Ann Widdecombe replied: "*Er...We've certainly had er...women er...a woman abscond er...when she was er...fairly well into her pregnancy um...and she went for an antenatal appointment, and she jumped out of a first floor window.*"

Pat Thomas