

Carol Ann Duffy takes on prison book ban with Pentonville protest

Poet laureate joins actors and writers at London prison to campaign against decision to stop inmates' access to books

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Link to video: [Book ban: poets protest at Pentonville prison](#)

The poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, joined other writers and actors outside a north London jail on Friday as the campaign to overturn the government's ban on sending books to prisoners gathered pace.

Buses and lorries rumbled past Pentonville prison as Duffy, supported by actors Sam West and Vanessa Redgrave and novelists AL Kennedy and Kathy Lette, used a megaphone to read her poem *Prayer*, and told the crowd that the government's decision to stop books and other essentials being sent to prisoners threatened "the soul of the country".

"These values which distinguish our country – imagination, sympathy and tolerance and compassion – are in danger of being lost ... those with nothing are now being told by this government that they now have less than nothing."

The gathering, which was supported by human rights campaigners and civil liberties groups, is the latest stage in an increasingly bitter row that has pitched some of the country's leading authors and poets against the justice minister, Chris Grayling.

The new rules, which came into force in November, prevent prisoners from receiving parcels from the outside unless they have "exceptional circumstances", such as a medical condition. Books, subscription magazines and clothing are all prohibited.

The playwright David Hare said: "A mistake has been made and my guess is it has been made accidentally – Grayling does not know what he is doing: he is way out of his depth. All we are looking for is a graceful way of him apologising and climbing down. All you can say is the sooner he does it the better, because he is going to have to do it."

As guards looked on from Pentonville's entrance, West said he was appalled by the government's attitude. "I heard a minister on the radio saying prisoners aren't sitting there waiting for their next Jane Austen to arrive and I thought – apart from that being a snide comment – is it because they can't read very well, because lots of prisoners can't and if so why are you not flooding prisons with books? It seems to me to be a terrible reason for not putting books in prisons – that people are not waiting for their next Jane Austen."

Hundreds of writers, including Mark Haddon, Alan Bennett, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Ian Rankin and Irvine Welsh, have denounced the ban revealed by Frances Crook, chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, when she wrote an article outlining the restrictions imposed on families and friends wishing to send parcels to prisoners.

The chief inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick, called the blanket ban a mistake that should be reversed, and there has been a furious reaction from the literary establishment.

Author Joanna Trollope, who regularly gives talks in prisons about writing, said: "It seems to me too crackers to really be true. It seems to me utterly, utterly bonkers ... leave aside all the inhumanity of it, it's such a ludicrously impractical, extravagant way of thinking."

"Because it's not rehabilitating these people who need it so badly and therefore they're going to come out and wreck the lives of their women and children and men friends and everything and they're going to offend again and cost the taxpayer yet more and be kept expensively in prison for another term. It's just the most bogglingly bonkers thing I've ever heard."

Outside Pentonville, as curious passersby stopped to listen to the impromptu poetry session, Crook said the campaign would gather pace. "We are delighted that so many famous authors and other eminent figures in the arts are supporting our campaign to ensure friends and family can send books and other essentials to prisoners behind bars," she said.

"That the poet laureate has volunteered to arrange this reading speaks volumes about the opposition that the Ministry of Justice faces on this ill-thought-out and petty measure."

Lette said she was appalled by the government's attitude and was planning to base her next "evil protagonist" on Grayling. "Books should not be a privilege: they are a staple. You might as well take away their food and water. If prisons are about rehabilitation, books are psychologically, emotionally and educationally nurturing and it is the best way to lift people up out of the rut they are in."

Redgrave said the decision revealed the government's "mean mind" and said literature allowed people to think beyond their own immediate problems and gave them hope. "Prison is supposed to be a place of rehabilitation," the actor said. "It is not supposed to be a place where you are beaten down to your knees and then, if you say sorry enough times, you are given an extra sandwich."

Grayling has remained defiant this week. Writing on the Conservative home website, he strongly defended the measures, saying they represented the kind of change the public wanted to see – "a regime that is more spartan unless you do the right thing". He said: "It was never the case that prisoners were simply allowed unlimited parcels, books or otherwise ... It would be a logistical impossibility to search them all, and they would provide an easy route for illegal materials. The only change over the past few months has been to ensure all prisoners are treated the same. They can receive one parcel of essential items when they first arrive, but after that they can only get letters and cards from home, unless the circumstances are exceptional."

But the author AL Kennedy said the campaign would continue until the government backed down. "This is not about being nice to bad people, this is about defending society as a whole," she said. "If you don't rehabilitate prisoners then we will all have problems in the future."

Lib Dems backtrack

Liberal Democrats say they will review their support for justice secretary Chris Grayling's restrictions on what families and friends can send to prisoners if there is evidence that it is preventing prisoners accessing books that would help with their rehabilitation.

The Lib Dem justice minister Simon Hughes has supported Grayling's decision to restrict parcels sent to prisoners.

But Hughes, seen as being on the party's radical wing, has rejected claims by authors and the Howard League for Penal Reform that Grayling has allowed new instructions to be sent out banning packages containing books being sent to specific prisoners. However, the party leadership is now stressing: "If the rules prove to be restricting prisoners' access to books, we will look at it."

Caron Lindsay, the co-editor of the Liberal Democrat Voice website, warned: "Books are an essential part of life. Grayling needs to be careful about restricting too many of life's essentials or he may well end up with riots on his hands."