

The government's ban on prisoners receiving books is the antithesis of the rehabilitation revolution promised by Chris Grayling

By Democratic Audit

*The government's decision to ban prisoners from receiving books has been widely condemned. In this post **Richard Ridyard** examines the ongoing controversy surrounding the issue. He argues that the Justice Secretary Chris Grayling's rationale is confused and contradictory, and that the restrictions are the antithesis of the 'rehabilitation revolution' the government has promised.*



Chris Grayling has refused to reconsider the prohibition on books for prisoners. Credit: [Chris Beckett](#), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Changes to the [Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme](#) which came into effect in November 2013 continue to vex. The new rules form part of the Justice Secretary Chris Grayling's 'rehabilitation revolution' – an attempt to reshape [alleged lax conditions](#) in the prison system. Prisoners may now only receive parcels in exceptional circumstances, such as to assist with disability. The ban on parcels includes the sending of birthday presents, underwear and outerwear. How piquant this will have been to enthusiasts of a more punishment-orientated regime. The tougher stance that Grayling wishes to exhibit, however, comes at a price: prisoner access to books will be restricted. And it is the prohibition on sending prisoners books that has been the biggest source of public grievance. At the vanguard of this critical response lies the Howard League for Penal Reform. Its chief executive, Frances Crook, was quick to [inveigh against the measures](#) – which was swiftly followed by the launch of a [books for prisoners campaign](#).

If the Ministry of Justice were expecting an evanescence of the campaign after Chris Grayling's [first attempt](#) to justify the measures they were mistaken. Two days later, members of Britain's literati combined to condemn the new rules – with some show of reason it seems. 'Books represent a lifeline behind bars, a way of nourishing the mind and filling the many hours prisoners are locked in their cells,' reads an [open letter](#) signed by over 80 leading authors. Passing the time is just one of many arguments for a rich supply of books. The literacy skills of prisoners has long been cause for concern. In 2010, the National Skills Forum published a [report](#) which found that almost

half of all prisoners have literacy skills at or below level 1. Standards are unlikely to improve if access to books is, in any way, restricted. Education is a functional attribute of rehabilitation worth emphasising. The same NSF report showed that 52% of male offenders and 72% of female offenders have no qualifications whatsoever. At a time when prisoners ought to be encouraged to study for Open University courses or other qualifications it seems counter-productive to introduce measures that makes the necessary study material more difficult to get hold of.

Escalating things further, according to Geoffrey Robertson Q.C. – who has offered to take the case pro bono publico – legal action could be taken against Grayling for acting “[unlawfully and irrationally](#)”. The joint head of Doughty Street Chambers believes it could be argued that Grayling was breaching the 1688 Bill of Rights by taking it upon himself, as a politician and not a judge, to inflict “cruel and unusual punishment” on literate prisoners. This is not the only legal challenge Grayling lays open to. A case may be made that the right of prisoners to receive information has been pared down which could amount to a breach of [article 19](#) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Throughout all of this Chris Grayling has been intransigent; insisting that the decision to prohibit sending prisoners books was the right one. But the rationale behind the ban is apt to confuse as the justice secretary looks to have seamlessly flitted between two different positions. Grayling began with a robust line that included purging the prison system of what he considered excess privilege and incentivising prisoners towards ‘good behaviour’. This reward for compliance system, however, contains a fascinating contradiction: regardless of how compliant prisoners are with prison rules, whatever level of the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme they are on, they will not be able to receive books from the outside.

Upon realising this another line of reasoning emerged from the Ministry of Justice. The primary concern, it has been [suggested](#), is the smuggling of drugs, weapons and other illegal materials into prison. In a [riposte to critics](#), Grayling argues it would be a logistical impossibility to search an unlimited number of parcels and would therefore provide an easy route for illegal materials. And yet, for years prisons received parcels and every parcel was searched, [explains](#) Andrew Neilson, director of campaigns at the Howard League. ‘Drugs are a major [problem](#) behind bars,’ Neilson continues, ‘but there are other ways they are getting into prisons.’

Grayling highlights two means, through which, prisoners can access books. One method involves prisoners purchasing books from a catalogue with money they have earned. ‘If a prisoner is lucky enough to get a job working in the kitchen or cleaning the wings,’ [writes](#) Frances Crook, ‘the average earning is £8 a week.’ This means the cost of one book may be a full week’s wages. Prisoners can also borrow books from prison libraries argues the justice secretary. Probe a little deeper and the confidence Grayling has in prison libraries being able to adequately supply books appears misplaced. This is because the prison system is not insulated from the coalition’s predominant theme of austerity. ‘I want us to strain every sinew to make our prison system more cost effective, to bring those costs down’ said Grayling when launching his [rehabilitation revolution](#). This statement of intent has much to reveal about the future state of prison libraries. Already, it seems, the degeneration is underway. Throughout April this year, the Howard League was contacted by members of the public reporting that books had not reached the libraries. And a former prisoner told the [Guardian](#) that cutbacks meant that few new books were bought and local libraries were far less able to supply books on loan.

One question worth ruminating over is: how many prisoners actually want to read books? A recondite [study](#) on the work of Prison Reading Groups (PRG) shows the impulse towards reading is strong. In 2010, PRG were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Knowledge Transfer Fellowship grant to expand their work. During the thirty months of AHRC funding PRG supported thirty-two groups. Of those groups, at the time of publication of the report in July 2013, twenty-eight were still going strong. Just as telling are the dozens of encomia heaped on the PRG in the report by the prisoners and volunteers involved.

For now, the coalition refuses to entertain the possibility of lifting the restrictions. But there is no conjuring away the many concerns expressed about the negative impact that these measures will have. To fulfill the aim of encouraging prisoners to adhere to rules and engage with rehabilitation Grayling has produced an antithesis by restricting access to a valuable source of rehabilitation. Until books are ubiquitous in prisons the rehabilitation reflowering which Grayling claims he seeks will not be possible.

Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding.

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