



Fiona Mactaggart

Labour MP for Slough

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Fiona regularly writes articles in the Slough papers...

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Today in the USA a Slough woman, Chantal McCorkle, is appearing in court. Chantal has been in jail since 1999, yet she has hardly made a dent in her 24 years and four month sentence. Not for violence, but for money and fraud-related offences.

As criminal justice minister I am cruelly aware that the wheels of justice grind slowly, victims often tell me that a trial feels like it has happened so late in the process that it reopens their pain. Delay is also a feature of the US system and only now, after she has served what would be the likely maximum UK sentence for such a crime, is her final appeal against sentence being heard.

I work with her lawyers here and in the United States, have persuaded 126 Members of Parliament to back her and have pressed the Foreign Office to support her in prison, I've written to President Bush and to the American Ambassador, I regularly talk with Chantal's mother in Slough and am in touch with Chantal herself. Now Chantal's future depends on a judge in Orlando, Florida.

I can't intervene in a court case – whether in the United States or the United Kingdom – and that is right. Judges should consider the law and the facts of the cases before them, and they shouldn't be subject to political pressures. But I hope that the facts the judge is considering today will include the huge support for Chantal here in her home town.

Once it is clear what the final sentence will be, Chantal can apply to return to a British prison, nearer her family and friends. And I can help then, to ensure that our procedures for considering transfer are efficient and fair.

It's a challenge being prisons minister – prison sentences act to protect us from crime, but equally important is working with offenders, in prison and on community sentences, to stop them committing further crimes. Contact with their families helps to reduce the risk of re-offending. Nobody thinks Chantal would offend again – but she should be close to her family.