

8,000 miles for 95 minutes

CHANTAL has been in jail in the USA for most of the time I have been MP for Slough, so when I was visiting family in New York last week I travelled to see her.

Friday, midnight New York time, I landed in San Francisco. Two hours later I reached the hotel. I had been given permission to visit the next day and arranged to leave all my belongings at the hotel as I was not permitted to take them to the prison.

The first taxi wouldn't take me there – he did not have his ID. Despite the delay I arrived before 9am but the officer told me she was not authorised to admit me. I told her I had permission and had to wait while she called her boss.

While I was waiting for him 9.15am passed, after then no new visitors are admitted until the 10am count is completed. So, with a family who spoke Spanish and



“It was certainly worth going but it reminded me how casually cruel that prison system is. This one visit that Chantal had was decimated by their carelessness and disregard.”
– Fiona Mactaggart MP

Slough's MP Fiona Mactaggart, a former Home Office prison minister and long-term supporter of Chantal McCorkle and the Observer's campaign to get her a prisoner transfer, has been to Chantal's current 'home' – a San Franciscan jail. Here she tells of her experience

who had been confused by the forms, I was turfed out of the building.

We would be admitted again at 10.45am. In the next hour about another 25 people arrived to visit. All of us were kept outside until noon, no-one explained why, an experienced visitor told me it was often like this and there was no shelter when it rained.

I didn't get to see Chantal until 12.25pm and visits end at 2pm, therefore I had come 8,000 miles for 95 minutes.

But at least she was pleased to have a rare visit. She thanked the Slough Observer and its readers for their support, thinking about it brought tears. We talked about her trial and the difficulties since. I bought her a drink and a sandwich (I was too angry to eat, but I did not want to distress her).

Chantal was jailed in 1999 for her part in selling a get-rich-quick scheme on American television with her then husband William. A Florida Court found her guilty of fraud, money laundering and making false statements.

She was originally sentenced to 24 years, but this has reduced to 18 years following a re-sentenc-

ing hearing and appeal. I had met with Foreign Office ministers and officials before I went, and although I failed to persuade them to intervene they offered Chantal consular services.

Chantal told me the British consul in San Francisco claimed he could not visit the prison because he has no car – yet it's just a mile to the station.

We talked about the petty humiliations of prison life. Just the day before she had chased a governor along a landing to make absolutely sure that the documents which authorised my admission were at the gate and anywhere they might need to be (they were, but I believe the officials wanted to punish Chantal and me for daring to protest).

Chantal finds the uncertainty about her future and separation from her family very distressing. Visits, are only on Saturday and Sunday but a foreign prisoner like Chantal gets fewer.

William, her ex-husband, wants to be a TV evangelist when he gets out of jail. It's unfair that, because he is a US national, entitled to open prison conditions and parole, that may be long before Chantal is free.

Just before 2pm the noise in the room changed as people who had not had enough time said their last messages. The officer told me that I could come the next day. But he knew that this short visit was my only chance to talk to a woman who may face 10 more years in his jail.

It was certainly worth going but it reminded me how casually cruel



■ **POLITICAL ALLY:** Fiona Mactaggart with Chantal's mother Diane Forrester and an Observer campaign poster earlier this year. She visited Chantal, pictured left, in jail. 06-0092_b

that prison system is. This one visit that Chantal had was decimated by their carelessness and

disregard. She got 90 minutes with me, she should have had five hours and they didn't care.