

Report of demonstration at HMP Woodhill

Brian B 2004-11-30 23:58

Report from rally outside Woodhill Prison in Milton Keynes on Sunday 28 November. Purpose was to draw attention to Extradition without trial and indefinite detention of detainees. A few of the photos I took on the day are included.

A rally took place outside Her Majesty's Prison at Woodhill, in Milton Keynes, between 12:30 and 14:30 on Sunday 28 November 2004, to protest against the imprisonment without trial of detainees at Woodhill and Belmarsh prisons.

The rally was attended by about 200 people, who braved heavy rain, united in their reasoned opposition to arbitrary detention and manifest neglect of justice.

The demonstration was entirely peaceful, having been agreed upon in consultations between the Milton Keynes Stop War group and local police officers.

It was addressed by an impressive array of speakers, with support drawn from the following organisations: Stop Political Terror, Campaign against Criminalising Communities, Liberty, Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, the Muslim Parliament, Respect, the Socialist Party, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrat Party.

It was reported by ITV Anglia and by BBC Look East. A coach brought supporters from Birmingham. Two coaches from London were supported by Sadiq Khan, Labour Party prospective



One of the Speakers at the Rally

parliamentary candidate for Tooting. A minibus service between the rail station and HMP Woodhill was operated by Milton Keynes Stop War group.

The demonstration focused on the plight of Babar Ahmad, a British citizen who was born and brought up in South London. He is now detained at HMP Woodhill and faces extradition to the USA under the terms of a treaty that many speakers identified as being deeply unjust and legally flawed. The treaty makes no requirement for the USA to show reasonable cause for extradition; all that is required by the agreement between David Blunkett and John Ashcroft is that the USA provides a list of allegations. Babar Ahmad has no opportunity to contest these claims.

Under the terms of the same agreement, such neglect of due process would be inadmissible if the UK wanted to extradite someone from the USA. Moreover, the US Senate has not ratified the treaty. Yet it seems that Babar Ahmad faces continuation of this unjust process -- unapproved by Parliament -- at his next appearance at Bow Street magistrates court on 16 December 2004, as a result of the Home Secretary's use (some would say, abuse) of the Royal Prerogative.

The rally was addressed by Ashfaq Ahmad, a retired civil servant who is the father of Babar Ahmad. He told how his son had been arrested on 2 December 2003 and later found by a doctor, in the presence of forensic medical examiners, to be suffering from more than 50 injuries, including two which were potentially life threatening. No action has yet been taken against security officers for these injuries.

Babar Ahmad was released on 8 December 2003, without any charge being made against him. On 5th August 2004, he was re-arrested on an extradition warrant from the USA, which likewise gives him no opportunity to defend himself against

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View of protestors from road

any charge.

The injustice of the treatment of Babar Ahmad, and of other detainees at Woodhill and Belmarsh, was protested in speeches by Dr Adnan Siddiqui (Stop Political Terror), Saghir Hussein (criminal law solicitor), Dr G Siddiqui (leader of the Muslim Parliament), Sait Akgul (Respect), Doug Jewell (campaigns co-ordinator of Liberty), Steve Score (the Socialist Party), Saleh Mamon (Campaign against Criminalising Communities) and Tom Bolton (Milton Keynes Stop War group).

Natalia Garcia (solicitor to Woodhill and Belmarsh detainees) carefully explained the ways in which the Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act, of 2001, and the Extradition Act, of 2003, leave



Protestors Banner

lawyers unable to represent their clients properly. She spoke of the despair felt by the detainees.

The demonstration was very timely, coming at the end of a week when no less a person than the Director of Public Prosecutions, Ken Macdonald, had said that any move to abandon "fundamental principles" of the justice system would undermine public confidence in it. Likewise, this week, the United Nations Committee Against Torture called on the British Government to review its policy of indefinite detention of foreign terror suspects "as a matter of urgency".

Three residents of Milton Keynes addressed the rally.

Alan Francis, representing the Milton Keynes Green Party, said that many local residents had recognized the need for the construction of a prison in the new city, but could never approve the idea that prisoners were now being detained indefinitely without trial in their community. He affirmed the commitment of the Green Party to oppose detention without trial.

Jane Carr, the Liberal Democrat prospective parliamentary candidate for Milton Keynes North East, brought to the meeting the good wishes of Lord Goodhart, who recently made trenchant criticism of the US/UK extradition treaty in the House of Lords. She reaffirmed the position that detainees should either be released or brought to trial, as recently demanded by Mark Oaten, the Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesperson.

David Broadhurst, a member of the Milton Keynes Stop War group, read three eloquent letters from detainees and a letter to Babar Ahmad from a child. One letter concluded with these pleas: "If I am innocent, why am I in prison? If I am guilty, why I can't stand trial like everyone else? If there is so-called due process why can't it be applied on my case? Can you answer my questions? Can you help me? Can you hear my voice and screamings?"

There was one ineffectual note of dissent from the rally's insistence on justice for all. A small group of people carrying a Union flag passed by, showing the slogan "no rights for terrorists". They, like other citizens of Milton Keynes perhaps, may have been harbouring the delusion that the detainees in HMP Woodhill are convicted terrorists.

In fact, they are people who have been imprisoned on a presumption of guilt that has not been supported by evidence put to a jury. They are denied all hope of defending themselves against unspecified charges and all hope of release. The rally was united in its opposition to such grave injustice.

David Broadhurst Milton Keynes Stop War group 29 November 2004

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/ennull1302135.shtml>



A view looking towards the road from near the speakers platform