

## Euro court gives UK prisoners vote

**A BRITISH law banning prisoners from voting is a violation of human rights, the European Court of Human Rights ruled today.**

The verdict from Strasbourg means legal changes will have to be made to ensure that all prisoners in Britain can cast their vote in national and regional elections in future if they wish to do so.

The legal challenge was mounted by John Hirst while he was serving a life sentence in Rye Hill prison, Warwickshire, for the manslaughter of his landlady Bronia Burton, who he killed with an axe in 1979.

Now released and living in Hull, Mr Hirst, 54, said his fight had been about breaking the link between crime and the right to take part in the democratic process.

He said: "The human rights court has agreed with me that the Government's position is wrong ... it doesn't matter how heinous the crime, everyone is entitled to have the basic human right to vote."

After his application to vote from prison was turned down, Mr Hirst took his case to the High Court and lost. Then a seven-judge chamber of the Human Rights Court backed him and awarded him £8000 in costs and expenses.

The Government appealed to a 17-judge Grand Chamber of the Strasbourg Court, but it now has also backed Mr Hirst.

The judges said his human rights had been breached by the UK Government because the 1983 Representation of the People Act does not allow convicts to take part in parliamentary and local elections.

The Convention on Human Rights, to which Britain is a signatory, guarantees the "right to free elections" ... that applies equally to prisoners, said the judges.

Mr Hirst pleaded guilty in 1980 to a charge of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility but released last year.

Editor of the Prisons Handbook, Mark Leech, said: "This is a marvellous victory for John Hirst and for prisoners in general. It rights a wrong put into law over 40 years ago.

"Prisoners lose their liberty, not their place in the human race nor their position in the society of which this judgment makes clear they still remain a part."

General secretary of the Prison Officers' Association Colin Moses said: "This will focus politicians' minds on jails, if there are 77,000 votes there for them there."

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