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Man Finally Freed After 17 Years Under Indefinite Sentence

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After spending nearly two decades in custody for a teenage offence, Tony Betteridge has regained his freedom from a controversial sentence that has devastated countless lives across Britain.

Tony Betteridge was only 18 when he was imprisoned for setting fire to a blanket in a vacant building, a reckless act that caused damage but no injuries. He received an Imprisonment

for Public Protection (IPP) sentence, an indefinite jail term imposed by British courts between 2005 and 2012, which meant he could be held far beyond his minimum tariff if authorities deemed him unfit for release. Like thousands of others, Betteridge had no clear release date a situation the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture criticised as “psychological torture.”

Over the years, he was repeatedly denied freedom by the Parole Board, which cited concerns over maturity and stability. Though he was released briefly in his twenties, he was returned to prison multiple times for breaching strict license conditions, even when no new crimes were committed. At one point, he was recalled for intervening in a violent attack against his sister, an act that many would see as basic human decency.

While he languished behind bars, Betteridge’s family fell apart; his mother passed away, his sister was murdered, and his brother died from a drug overdose. The years spent in prison and the constant threat of being recalled left deep scars. “You just carry it, it ruins your head, your heart, your everything,” he told The Independent.

The IPP system, which was ultimately scrapped over human rights concerns, continues to affect over 2,500 people who remain in prison or under restrictive supervision. Some have served terms far exceeding their original sentences for minor or nonviolent crimes. Ministry of Justice data shows that 69 deaths among IPP prisoners in custody are recorded as self-inflicted to date.

Recent reforms under the current government have reduced IPP licence periods from ten years to three years, enabling Betteridge and others to have their licences considered for termination after this point. He described the moment as a “dream come true” and expressed hope for a new start abroad.

Yet, this case raises serious questions about whether the British justice system has struck the right balance between protecting the public and upholding basic liberties. Critics argue that indefinite detention without a clear path to release undermines trust in the rule of law and violates fundamental rights. With a new administration in place, there are renewed calls to finish what was started, ensuring no one remains trapped in a system that was abandoned for good reason.

Betteridge now joins campaigners urging the government to guarantee that others still caught in this cycle are given the chance to rebuild their lives. “All the sorry in the world is

not going to give your life back,” he said, “but it could make a difference now.”