

## Book Reviews

### **The honest politician's guide to prisons and probation**

By Roy King and Lucy Willmott

Publisher: Routledge (2022)

ISBN: 978-1-032-063326-3

(hardback) 978-0-367-77306-9  
(paperback)

Price: £96.00 (hardback) £27.99  
(paperback)

*Pen Picture: Dr. Jamie Bennett is the Chief Strategy Officer at the Youth Justice Board*

Reading academic books can be type-2 fun — a bit of a slog at the time but in retrospect it is rewarding and enriching. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to pick up this book and find that it was so engaging that I zipped through it in a few days. It offers insider accounts provided by the political and professional elites that have presided over prisons and probation since 1990, including interviews with six director generals of prisons, two directors of probation, sixteen Secretaries of State for Home Office or Justice, nine ministers responsible for prisons and probation, four Lord Chief Justices, four Chief Inspectors of Prisons and two Chief Inspectors of Probation. This unparalleled access makes this a unique, fascinating and valuable book.

The book has been written by Professor Roy King, a distinguished criminologist who has been conducting international research since the 1970s and has been regularly sought out to offer advice to politicians and senior professionals, and Dr. Lucy Willmott, who is based at University of Cambridge and has over two decades of research experience, including applied research in prisons and secure hospitals. They are

knowledgeable and insightful research partners, able to productively engage the interviewees, gathering rich data and presenting it compellingly. The title of the book is not intended to suggest that politicians are dishonest, but is instead a homage to Norval Morris and Gordon Hawkins' 1970 book *The honest politician's guide to crime control*. Both books are effectively intended to nurture evidence-based criminal justice infused with a liberal-humane set of values.

The book is set out in sections that follow the course of the governments of the last three decades — Conservative 1990-97, New Labour 1997-2010, Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010-15 and Conservative from 2015 up to 2019. The chapters briefly introduce the political context, then present the accounts of the primary players — politicians and officials — so as to explore the major issues, primary aims, the critical events and significant challenges. The presentation of the accounts attempts to make any commentary or critique relatively discrete and constrained, allowing people to offer their own perspective. While this book does give retrospective access to the 'top table', such accounts need to be seen in a wider context. In particular, the people being interviewed do not have the same lived experience of those subject to or working in prisons or probation during that period, but are instead removed and at some distance. There is also often a gap between intention and reality, and between policy and practice, which means that rhetorical accounts present a more coherent picture than is the actuality. The data from

these interviews therefore offers a particular perspective or set of experiences rather than the definitive account. Nevertheless, the novelty and value is that the experiences of such a wide range of elite participants is rarely drawn together as comprehensively as they are in this book.

One of the reasons I found this book so fascinating is that it effectively covers the period of time in which I have had an interest in prisons. I recall seeing the images of the Strangeways riot on the television news in 1990 and as a law student in the 1990s learned about the Woolf report and the problems of order in prisons. Having joined the Prison Service in the mid-1990s, my professional life is being played out in these pages. There will be many others with similar experiences who will read this book looking back over a working life, with all of the optimism, satisfaction, frustration and anger that comes with it. This is three decades that have seen sustained increases in the prison population; varying levels of economic investment, and; continuous organization change, often informed by neo-liberal and commercial practices.

The book closes with the authors making a number of suggestions for a better politics of criminal justice. They identify the significant problems that arise from the changing tone of public discourse about criminal justice becoming more punitive; the rapid churn of politicians and officials meaning that a consistent direction cannot be maintained, and an erosion of the balance between executive, legislature and judiciary meaning that criminal justice has become more politicized. The

solutions, in the view of the authors, lie in a reduction in the prison population achieved through a systematic reform of sentencing, with measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary as well as prisons and probation. None of these are new arguments, indeed in many ways they look backwards to a time when criminal justice was a less politicized issue and was largely led by expert criminal justice elites. The changes the author suggest are unlikely any time soon, as they recognize, but perhaps they are also failing to engage with contemporary society. One of the reasons that rational ideas of patrician elites have lost favour is that they aren't in tune with how significant parts of the population feel, whereas much populist rhetoric does resonate with many people. Perhaps the starting point to find better ways to communicate with the wider population is listening to their experiences and perspectives and engaging with them, whether that is through for example grass roots activism, education, or popular culture.

Roy King and Lucy Willmott deserve to be acclaimed for pursuing their research, getting the engagement of such a stellar cast and producing an engaging book. The data will be of huge value to those researching and studying prisons, and the insider account will be of immense interest to those who have been involved in prisons and probation over the last three decades. This book doesn't have all of the answers, no book could have, but I don't think any reader will come away without feeling they can and must do more to make a positive difference. The future of prisons and probation shouldn't solely be in the hands of honest politicians, academics or officials but also in the hands of honest citizens.

## **Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men: (Re)Education**

By Helen Nichols

Publisher: Routledge (2021)  
ISBN: 9780367521394 (Paperback)  
9780367340650 (Hardback)  
9780429323850 (eBook)  
Price: £36.99 (Paperback) £120.00 (Hardback) £33.29 (eBook)

*Pen Picture: Angelique Mulholland is a Doctoral researcher focussing on the educational experiences and gender subjectivities of imprisoned men, and a former prison teacher. She is based at the Institute of Education, UCL's department of Education and Society.*

There has been increasing interest in prison education over the last 10 years from recent successive governments and policy makers, as well as academics working hard to advance and understand better the educational experiences of imprisoned people. Helen Nichols' work is both located and integral to this uptick and offers a compassionate, informative and accessible in-road into understanding the educational experiences of imprisoned adult men in Britain today. I came across Dr Nichols' work whilst in my first teaching post in an adult male category B prison. Her newly published thesis, *An Inquiry into Adult Male Prisoners' Educational Experiences*,<sup>1</sup> deepened my understanding of the complexity of the educational experiences of the students in my classroom. Her book, *Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men*, thus reflects her 10 years of academic and teaching work in prisons, and has again offered invaluable insight to me, this time in my capacity as an aspiring prison education researcher.

Each chapter explores highly relevant themes connected to the educational experiences, identities and journeys of imprisoned men. The first chapter begins by identifying the tension for anyone serving time in prison, or for that matter, working in a prison education department. Nichols points out that the broad aims of prison and education are at odds: '...one aim is to punish and one aim to provide personal development' (p.13). It is within this tension, Nichols argues, that prison learners and educators must find a way to navigate the many complexities of prison life and the barriers that can impede educational flourishing. The first chapter also gives an interesting historical account of prison education as well as an overview of the present-day employability model, and a compelling argument for an alternative humanistic model based on 'care and dialogue' (p.19) for prison learners.

In the following chapters, Nichols discusses broad themes such as desistance, identity and relationships on the inside and outside of prison, and how these themes intimately connect with prisoners' educational journeys through prison. Her reflections are rooted in the words of people on the ground in prison, as each chapter has excerpts from serving prisoners, prison leavers and prison staff collated from her work over the last decade. In the course of these discussions, Nichols introduces the reader, through accessible language and an engaging tone, to some of the most important works of prison sociology. For example, Syke's seminal work *The Society of Captives* is discussed in chapter three, where she introduces his 'classic pains of imprisonment' (p.46) — deprivation of liberty, heterosexual relationships,

1. Nichols, HE (2016) *An Inquiry into Adult Male Prisoners' Experiences of Education*. Doctoral thesis, University of Hull.