

The Future of Prison Reform

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This interview took place on 3rd July 2025

LS: What, with Starmer's Labour Government entering into its second year in power, are some of the opportunities your organisations suggest should be considered for prisons in England and Wales over the coming years?

PS: Our opportunity is twofold. First is the Sentencing Review, with upcoming legislation we act as 'legal levers' that need to press, push and pull to bring the legislation into a sensible format. We give our energy to that; it is the bread and butter of the PRT. The Bill is going to be going through at quite a pace, so we are spending time giving useful amendments to the right people and to influence the debate.

Secondly, is to look at the non-legislative aspects of the Sentencing Review Bill, thinking about how some of the stuff is going to be operationalised. What is the level of realism of some of these reforms?

We need to shine a light on the things that perhaps could fall apart if they are not planned well and could become counterproductive. I think that the PRT can play a big and useful role.

In terms of our strategic priorities, we have tried to clear enough space in our workload - this is probably a once in a lifetime opportunity - we must sharpen our focus to make the best out of what will be. So, I think in terms of Starmer's government, the first year was about trying to

influence what gets done, and the second stage is going to be about how it's done.

RG: I agree with more or less everything Pia said. The general election was a year ago as of tomorrow, and one thing to say is that the Government has had a pretty torrid time. On a broader political front, extraordinarily for a Government with such a huge majority, it feels like it is virtually in crisis. Now, the Government when they are facing this kind of crisis have given up worrying about the Conservatives, but the worry is Reform. To a prison reformist agenda, trying to think of a more positive future for prisons, for those imprisoned, and those working in prisons, it seems that there are probably not a lot of votes in liberal prison reforms. The concern is that in terms of the available opportunities, there are very few. Pia pointed out the Sentencing Review, which is probably the main opportunity. But it is what the Government are not doing that we should also be concerned about, which is pursuing anything approaching a decarcerationist agenda. They are saying all this stuff about the 33% possible release date, but we could quite quickly be moving from a situation with SDS40,³ to SDS66. The crisis could get worse, and that is in the context of a very difficult political situation for the Government.

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¹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/>

² <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/>

³ SDS40, or Standard Determinate Sentences 40%, is a UK policy implemented in July 2024 to reduce prison overcrowding by allowing eligible prisoners serving determinate sentences to be released at the 40% mark of their sentence, rather than the usual 50%. This is a temporary measure, subject to eligibility criteria and with certain exemptions, to address capacity issues within the prison estate.

I do not want to sound too 'Eeyore-ish' about it, because I agree with everything that Pia said. There are obviously opportunities, and I think that is true both on some of those bigger picture things and on more specific areas. We have been doing a lot of work around the Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence recently and although in one sense we feel like we have reached a bit of a stalemate, we know that there is, at a ministerial level, a lot of openness to try to think creatively about addressing the problems with IPP.

Engaging where the legislation is going in relation to sentencing is right, but also picking battles on specific areas, such as women's justice and youth justice. There are opportunities, whether that is engaging specifically with ministers, civil servants, or members of Government or parliament. We have at least 100 Labour MPs who are never going to have any role in Government in this Parliament. So, there is going to be lots of MPs on the backbenches looking for things to do - interesting areas, interesting causes.

PS: I completely agree, and I think there are so many potentials given the political landscape right now. Where with all the best will and intention in the world, it can just get completely sidelined. We are worried about incentivised progression which could be counterproductive by increasing violence in prisons rather than leading to good, better behaviour.

We are also worried about what will happen with short sentences if you don't stand up services in the community beforehand. Does that mean that what could be a short sentence gets up-tariffed because people have exhausted everything else in the community?

That is why it is really important that we are clearing the decks and saying 'let's concentrate on this and try and get it right' by influencing Government. How successful we will be is anybody's guess, but that feels like where the energy should go.

LS: How is the current Government engaging with the voices of penal reformists?

RG: In my experience, not very much. But as an organisation, CCJS plays a slightly different role than the PRT a very complimentary role. In the inside-looking-out

and outside-looking-in metaphor, we tend to be more on the outside. As a small organisation your capacity to influence ministerial decisions is pretty minimal unless you happen to be telling them something they really want, which aligns with the direction they want to go in. Which, because of the nature of our work, is generally not the case. But you can get a bit of a momentum going in Parliament- it's more difficult for ministers to ignore parliamentarians. We have seen that with IPP, with the private members' Bill that Lord Woodley is pushing, which we have worked on quite closely. One of the things that this has done is force the Minister to meet on a regular basis with a group of peers concerned about IPP, talking about a range of issues and making some progress. One of the things we have seen is ministers taking a specific interest in particularly egregious cases where IPP prisoners should not have been recalled. You can see where there is some kind of indirect way of engaging with ministers, and obviously through the media work we do. I don't really think the Government engages with us, but that is partly a choice on both sides, I suspect.

PS: Again, I agree with Richard. The PRT has always tried to influence in many different ways, and we are probably more inside the tent than outside. But it is not just with government and ministers.

Since James Timpson has been in post as the Minister for Prisons, I would say that there is a greater overt intention to 'engage'. But what is the purpose of that engagement? Is it about making us all feel important? Or is it really about trying to get our views and fixing some of the intractable wicked problems? How much is engagement being done that feels collaborative and collegiate as opposed to 'tick box'? I'm undecided on that.

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I have been leading the PRT for two years now, so I can only compare to what was happening before and after James (Timpson) taking up the ministerial post. We are involved a lot more and I think that the setup of the Women's Justice Board is an interesting new way of engaging. We're still trying to work out whether it is tokenistic or whether it is going to be genuine; the jury's out, and I don't want to be too cynical about it, but equally, I don't want to be naive about it. But I think what feels more useful is our engagement with officials and with senior leaders in prisons. Because influence for me is about what is happening to change operational delivery, what is really going on in our prisons, and our probation service, that is having meaningful impact on the beneficiaries of people in prison and people on probation. I find it satisfying the work that we do behind the scenes with officials and senior leaders, doing leadership programmes with Governors and Deputy Governors, doing work with policy leads to influence them, because that is what leads to immediate improvement in conditions on the ground.

RG: During the period roughly from 2005 to 2012, prisons were doing all right. There were lots of problems, but they were broadly going in the right direction. I think a lot of people working in the reform sectors were quite focused on big pictures, big ideas, and since 2014 or 2015 prisons have nosedived into more difficulties. The missing agenda is around making sure there are not rats, and prisoners have something approaching a decent cell to sleep in, and that prison officers have decent working conditions. I just feel that has become a much more pressing and important issue.

Perhaps the penal reform sector has taken a while to catch up with that, so I applaud the work that the PRT and others are doing to try and make that point.

A prisoner should feel safe, in decent conditions, properly fed, with enough time out of the cell, and prison officers should feel safe not worrying that they are going to be attacked.

Can we at least try putting the big ideas to one side and make sure that prison staff have a decent place to work and are properly paid?

That there are enough officers, that they are properly trained so that prisoners experiencing a problem can get some kind of resolution?

A prisoner should feel safe, in decent conditions, properly fed, with enough time out of the cell, and prison officers should feel safe not worrying that they are going to be attacked. Given where we currently are, the mundane decency agenda approaches a revolutionary demand. This tells us a lot about how far prisons have fallen over the last decade or so.

LS: What do you think should be the future relationship between the Government, HMPPS, and reformists groups?

RG: Ministers and HMPPS need to, at a certain level, get over themselves and accept that having a vibrant reformist sector that is prepared and confident about telling them things they do not want to hear, is a strength rather than being a sign of disloyalty. In a democratic society, where it is easy for power to become deaf to important critical challenge, it is important that the voice of the sector is strong, confident, and bold. That does not mean that everyone has to agree with each other. We need to recognise that a lot of the time ministers, civil servants, prison officers, staff, and Governors are trying to do the best they can, given the hand they have been dealt. Let's not give them a hard time, but at the same time let us provide a robust challenge. Ministers and HMPPS can be a little bit overly sensitive to principled challenge. On the other hand, reform organisations, partly because of funding and other concerns, perhaps pull their punches and self-censor. A bit more of a respectful, robust exchange would be beneficial for everyone.

PS: Richard and I have ended up agreeing on most things. I'll give you an interesting anecdote because it is similar to what it has been like on the Women's Justice Board. It is a fascinating experience for me because I've been in the role of the official, and now I'm on the other side and I can empathise with both groups. We were having this meeting with one poor official; something awful had happened, I was watching the process, and I really felt for her, because what she was experiencing was genuine anger, frustration, and real, compelling, critical but constructive points about what was going wrong. Intelligent debate, but very piercingly projected. She felt completely defenceless in that, and I thought that she's never going to come to one of these meetings again because her experience was like being in the middle of a bear pit. I felt that one of my roles in there was to try to help her. I said, because I could see what people needed to hear at that time, that we, through the fear that is built around a distrustful relationship, don't bring out the best in each other. Then what happens is that you don't end up realising that you have a common purpose. It becomes self-defeating because a simple principle is not applied from the outset.

Richard makes this point about trust and that we want the same things. I think that there is inherently a power difference between officials, government, and the rest of the prison reform sector. What happens is when they feel that you have irritated them too much, they will shut the doors and then you do not have any influence. So, we have to be clever and astute about it, and you have got to try and do all of those things in quite a finessed way. But I think that what my advice was to my colleagues within the Women's Justice Board, and to officials, is to say we need to always start by talking about what our common purpose is from the outset and that we are not in a complicated situation.

We don't then waste our time fighting each other, which is inevitably what happens. Then you don't get anywhere, and everyone gets frustrated. We must try to do that better.

I worked with an official who's got a really helpful attitude. She says, 'Pia, you know what?

The more I involve your sector, the quality of my reports are so much better. My briefings are so much better, the end point is so much better'. We want to influence, and we're good at it in a way that perhaps people in government might not be, because that's not necessarily their skill set. If you see prison reform as useful and helpful, you might get further. I think that is not always easy to do because people see us as annoying, irritating, and frustrating, and a good proportion of people who work in government have made it such an art form to know how to move the piece of paper around the table.

But it is about trying to establish what those win-win positions are. That requires both groups to change their behaviour going forward, if we want to make a difference.

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LS: How are your organisations gathering and collecting evidence to push for progressive futures for prisons in England and Wales?

PS: Our principle is that evidence has to be multifaceted, and it needs to come from multiple sources. There is not one source or one group that provides you with the 'truth'. The more triangulated your evidence is, the better. That is why we have academics that we can lean on. We have people in prison from whom we get a lot of data and all the work that we do through our phone lines, our Building Futures group,⁴ or through our prisoner engagement network. But equally with senior leaders and practitioners, because that is the pipeline I wanted to strengthen. I think that it is really important that you not only get their views but give them some of the benefit of the solutions that might be floating around the sector. The evidence that we then collate, broadcast, and brief on becomes plausible for those reasons. If there are some missing voices, then we are also able to amplify them, including our sectors' voice.

⁴ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures/>

RG: 'Evidence' is doing a lot of heavy lifting here. First of all, it can be a disease of campaigning, we can see it in other sectors where the desire to get the change you want leads to exaggeration and embellishment. I have always been of the view that the facts are damning in themselves. You do not need to exaggerate; you just need to explain the situation as it is. That is itself a form of condemnation, even if that is all you do. This is certainly the case with prisons which are in a terrible situation, which is not the fault of the staff who are often just trying to do their best. One of the things that focusing on data and evidence does is to keep you honest, because if you focus on what we want to know, we want to know what the evidence is. It helps to keep you honest. But then when we think about what we mean by evidence, which is my second thought, there is obviously data, such as how many people are in prison, ethnic disparities, what's happening with women, health, and all the rest, which is really important. But also, there are both the qualitative and the quantitative measures of that. There is also a lot of evidence that you can just come across in other reports and in other places which can be forgotten and lost. For example, before the Gauke Review (Independent Sentencing Review), there was the Carter Review on prison (2007), there was the Woolf Inquiry into the HMP Strangeway situation (1991), and there was a May Report (1979). In some ways, all of these reports are versions of the same thing, and going back to some of that old evidence and drawing it forward and reminding ourselves that we are going round in circles can be important.

Crucially, how you think about and apply that evidence and that data is important because data rarely speaks for itself. You know, we can see that in some of the arguments about 'two-tier justice' and what we think that means, the seemingly same facts can be interpreted in very different ways. Having capacity and being comfortable with thinking about the evidence, really thinking about it, being open to thinking about it in creative ways, and being open to hearing someone else's take on it, is really important for organisations like CCJS and PRT.

But it is also important for the political world, for ministers and civil servants, for parliamentarians, for other criminal justice and reform organisations, because otherwise you can get ossified and repeat the same old mantras.

PS: I again agree. I think evidence is taking a battering over emotions. Emotional responses are the ones that are driving the agenda rather than evidence. For organisations like PRT, we are always going on about the evidence, we

have to try and think about what a different approach is to being influential. There was a time when evidence was more compelling, I find myself saying that over and over again in interviews. The moment you have someone give an emotive speech about two-tier justice, it all goes out the window. We need to try and be agile in our approach, asking what the role of evidence, is and can evidence be used in a different way. We are thinking about the role of evidence from public engagement. How do you get that in a form that feels like it is asking the right questions, that you are exposing people to a deliberative process, like citizen assemblies - we want the evidence from that.

We have to try and be cute about it too, because if we want to get those aims, the usual format is not really cutting it. Just sticking to your guns will only appeal to a certain group in your usual echo chamber, but outside of that, you need outreach and that requires changing your approach and not being too invested in that way of thinking.

RG: I strongly agree with that, and I think one of the problems for the prison reform sector over the years is that at times, we have tended to approach the 'public', whatever you might mean by that, almost like visiting missionaries, like "let us help you become more like us" and "if we could just share these facts, just listen, please just listen to these facts then you'll understand that you were wrong, and then you can become more like us". For all sorts of reasons that is probably not going to be very successful, if it ever was. Organisations should have the real capacity to listen and think quite carefully and seriously about why it might be that members of the public are often open to what we might consider to be extreme policies. Trying to think, as Pia was saying, about different ways of thinking about these problems, in a way that's empathetic and genuinely on receive as well as broadcast. Because, in terms of the way that we engage with politicians, that is what they are getting in their mailboxes or on social media. We have got to be smart and clever about this, and less patronising, frankly.

PS: Yes, and to be prepared to change your position. You know, we've grounded ourselves into this position. Maybe we need to morph as well.

LS: Do we currently have the policy solutions to meet the challenges of our time and in the future?

RG: My immediate reaction was 'no, obviously we don't'. But actually, I think we do. The problem is not that we don't have the policy solutions, it is that we don't seem to have the political capacity to implement the solutions. That is obvious. Even something like the Gauke Review, which has produced a very nuanced, careful report; he is not a revolutionary but nonetheless has produced an interesting report which is friendly to a cautious government, and already some of the more interesting proposals are being watered down or being rejected. The kind of solutions are there in the Gauke Review to a degree. The solutions are there in previous reports too; think about the Casey Review of grooming gangs, and some other reports on police racism; some of the really excellent reports coming from the Prisons Inspectorate on individual prisons, and some of the thematic work they have done in the past, the IMBs,⁵ the National Preventive Mechanism,⁶ academic research, research from organisations like CCJS and PRT and others.

We are not short of solutions. We are short of a political class that feels able to implement them. I do not myself buy into the 'we just need politicians to do the right thing', because current politics is not particularly friendly to that approach. We saw that with the argument over the pre-sentence report guidelines from the Sentencing Council. There is a stuckness in the political process. Politicians are dominated by everything that's happened to date and the shadow of the past, which casts a huge shadow over them, but also a fear of the future. It is so much easier if you're the Justice Secretary to be cautious because if you don't think your cautious plan is going to work, well, you're only going to be in place for 2 or 3 years and then it will be someone else's problem. You don't want to be the Justice Secretary whose plans end up with a person convicted of sexual crime being released from prison and then going on to do something horrible, or your policies become the liability going into the next general election because it's illustrative of so much 'wokeism'. So, the political process, the decision-making process, is stuck and really jammed up; we have solutions coming out of our ears.

PS: I'd agree, it is the same with the Female Offender Strategy, we had the Corston Report that started it and there was probably an iteration before that. We are not short of solutions, and we are not short of ambition. The way that I saw the difference between what happens, is

when we went to Holland to look at their prison system, which illustrated it well. Their theory of change is not as good as ours. What we believe within the prison system, about what should happen around rehabilitation, the proportionate view of punishment, and rehabilitation and so on...we have much more forward-thinking ideas. Our ideas are almost akin to the Scandinavian model. What we do not have is any ability to enact those ideas. There is not a pragmatism towards the enactment of them. There is not a will to the enactment of them, there is too much discussion, too much talk, very little action. There are too many distractions along the way that stop something from being delivered on the ground.

We also have this tendency to like 'shiny new things'. At the moment we have got a new Government in, or every time we have a new Justice Secretary they want to

come up with their own ideas, and what happens is that the whole machinery gets attracted to making that happen and deliver that rather than trying to say 'let's go with the original idea' which was fine in the first place. Maybe make it better but stick with it rather than try and reinvent it every time. Then what happens is that you don't progress. And I think what the difference was in Holland, they came up with an ideology around decarceration with a compelling idea and rationale for why it was good, they did a very

good campaign around public engagement, they built services around the prison sector so that there was genuine diversion and community work that was going on. Then they made it happen. Over a period of time, public opinion changed, they saw the impact, they saw that crime had reduced. Whilst not all of it is perfect, it has had a meaningful impact. One of the things that they were most appalled by, when we were exchanging information about their system and ours, was that even though they currently have quite a right-wing government there is a deep respect and clear blue water between the role of the Ministry, the politics, and the civil service. There is no interference. They respect the neutrality of civil servants and so interference does not happen. You are allowed as a civil servant to be the experts and to decide what is the best policy to have. I think this is what does not happen here, and that slows the process down. We don't need more solutions. We just need to go back to the few that we think really work and put our weight behind them and lead them to actions and deliverable outcomes rather than trying to finesse them endlessly.

We are not short of solutions. We are short of a political class that feels able to implement them.

⁵ Independent Monitoring Boards (<https://imb.org.uk/>)

⁶ <https://nationalpreventivemechanism.org.uk/>