

Interview with Andrea Albutt

Andrea Albutt was the President of the Prison Governor's Association from 2015 until her retirement from HMPPS in March 2024. She is interviewed by **Rachel Bell**, Senior Policy Lead, in HM Prison and Probation Service.

Andrea joined the Prison Service in 1990 following a 6-year career in the Army as a nurse. She has been operational throughout this period, first as a prison officer, working within the hospital wing of HMP Brixton where there was no integral sanitation and three men shared a cell built for one, then working through the grades to become a Governing Governor. She has seen and lived the history of the Service over these years including many challenging and defining moments. She has governed four prisons including two women's prisons and two male local/reception prisons. She believes wholeheartedly that we use prison too much and inappropriately, particularly for women offenders.

Andrea was elected to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Prison Governors' Association (PGA) in 2005 and became Vice President in 2009. In 2015, she was elected as the first woman president of the PGA, a post she has now held for 8 years. She is passionate about championing women in the workplace and more generally challenging any discrimination of minority groups or those with protected characteristics.

This interview took place in mid-2023.

Tell me a little about your career as a woman in HMPPS. Why did you leave nursing and the army to join the prison service?

I wish I could say there was some kind of calling that made me do it. But it was time to leave the army. I had done six years and I was ready to go because the army very much dictates your life. I was married, I was living in London, I had gained some rank as an army nurse and the NHS did not pay enough. If I am honest, it was purely a financial decision because I had a large mortgage — this was the end of the 80s and I needed to earn good money. So, it was purely financial initially.

I joined as a hospital officer. It was different then. Healthcare was not commissioned like it is now. It was run by prisons. I was employed as a prison officer and given an extra allowance because I was a qualified nurse working in the healthcare environment, as a hospital officer.

It was a very bumpy first year. I thought I had made the worst decision of my life. But then I got my teeth into it, and I've had a successful career.

Why was the first year bumpy?

Because I was a woman. It was difficult in Brixton prison as a woman. I had come from a male dominated environment — I had come from the army! But going into Brixton in 1990 and being one of very few women working in a male prison. I do not really want to go into all the detail of some of the comments that were levied at you. But it was totally, wholly inappropriate.

And I was a qualified nurse working with hospital officers who were not qualified nurses. They had done a short prison service course. But, for the first six months, my entire job was just going backwards and forwards bringing prisoners to see the doctor. That was my job. I didn't use any skills. I didn't so much as give out of paracetamol because that was the job I was given.

Was it because you were new or because you were a woman?

Probably a combination of both. But then I went to the hospital governor and said, 'I am not doing anything with my nursing skills', and that it was incredibly boring.

So that was when it changed for you?

Yes. I got moved to another part of the hospital complex. And then I was looking after people with physical illness and physical disabilities. We had eight beds, and I did enjoy that. I felt like I was going back to being useful.

And then you set your sights on going up the ranks?

Well, I wish I could say yes to that question, but I left Brixton and went, still as a hospital officer to Woodhill which was just opening. I really enjoyed Woodhill. It was very demanding and, because it was new, it had to develop its culture and its purpose — alongside lots of new staff. I enjoyed it because it was

quite frenetic and a bit mad. But the healthcare side of it was much more focused on care. And I was a prison officer enjoying doing that for seven years.

I moved from there to Grendon. Every prison officer should do a stint at Grendon. Apart from the fact that it is off-the-scale weird, and you cannot really describe it as a prison, you learn so much about the people that are in your care and their life stories. That probably most of them didn't stand a chance from day one, because of the mental health and the damage that they have suffered throughout life. It was when I was there that I thought it was time to start looking at moving onwards and upwards.

I got my SO at Grendon, my PO at Wakefield in charge of the healthcare centre, and just after that did my assessments to be functional head, and deputy governor and governor.

In your role with the PGA you represent the governor grades. How has the role of those governor grades change since you became a functional head in 1997?

There were more governors then. The span of control was smaller. I found being a head of function quite easy. If I am honest that was probably because of a lot of support below. We had many more first line managers. You did not have all the HR work because you had a head of personnel. There was a head of finance. You had departments supporting you. The workload, and the breadth of work was much less. Now PGA members are absolutely swamped with HR and lots of transactional work. The new HR model doesn't respond to their needs. And the casework support is very hit and miss. Life was a lot easier back then! And we didn't have computers. We had internal transit envelopes to send messages around the prison but no emails.

I have spent time fantasising about working like that, with no e-mails and just paper!

You just worked in a completely different way. It is very difficult to compare. We didn't have all the assurance and the scrutiny you've got now. The Standards Audit Unit was in its infancy. Before that, there was more money, there was less scrutiny, less

assurance, less pressure, and you were able to get on and do the job.

The workload has gone up. But I am not sure that the outputs from that workload are better than in the early 2000s. Back then you thought you were doing a good job. But because there was less scrutiny it's hard to be sure.

What about the improvements since then?

I think we have got some incredibly competent people. But we've been through a big period of austerity, and we had a very difficult time from 2012 until about 2017/18. I don't think we've recovered from that.

I think some of our policy and procedures are a barrier to creativity. Scrutiny and assurance could be reduced, and people given more freedom. But that is a scary concept because we are a command-and-control organisation. I don't know if you remember the blue, red, and purple leadership model? We were all supposed to be purple, but we are a blue organisation without a doubt, blue through and through, we just pretend we are not.¹

The prison service is at its finest when it is in command mode. COVID-19 proved that. But I think it is just the default position for the organisation. Our senior leaders generally come from a prison service background, and they have that blue DNA running through them.

We did have a period under Michael Gove when we had reform prisons. But the minute Michael Gove left we scuppered that and brought back the control. The autonomy was incredibly scary to our culture.

Scary to who? Lots of ministers talk about empowerment and governor autonomy. What stops those promises being delivered?

We are a political beast. Ministers are obviously very concerned about their political careers and to allow us to have those freedoms. We are unlike health, or even the police. We are not arm's length. We are politically buffeted by whoever is the incoming Lord Chancellor or prisons minister. We are at their whim. I think this is one of the reasons we are so often

1. The "purple leadership" model was promoted within HMPPS around 2008-2012. In a nutshell it advocated blending 'blue' procedural skills with 'red' interpersonal skills, to become a transformational 'purple' leader.

destabilised. They have their ministerial priorities, their little projects, but they just don't want it to go wrong because it could be a political disaster.

Gove wanted a model closer to that in health or education, to give prisons a status akin to that of foundational hospitals or academy schools.

But we could never have been that because we are a national service. We rely on each other. When I was governor of Bristol, Bristol would rely on Cardiff to support them in event of a crisis. And we move prisoners backwards and forwards. We could not have done it. Education does not work like that. Schools can be individual entities and little individual businesses. But prisons cannot. It just does not work.

In your recent speech to the All-Party Parliament Group for prisons you said: 'short-termism, party politics, constant changing of Secretaries of State, and personal ministerial priorities leave a system feeling like a political football, with no evidence of sustained improvement and often a legacy of dire consequences for all who live and work in prisons.' Are these features inevitably baked into our political system? What can be done about this?

I would want us to be more of an arm's length body, so we could have more autonomy, more freedom, and less interference from ministers so we can have a long-term strategy of where we are going. I am not saying there is no need for oversight and scrutiny, of course there would. But above all we need a Royal Commission to develop an all-party consensus and agreement on the strategy, so that we do not change course every time we get a new Secretary of State or another white paper.

One of my big beefs with the prison service — that I love with a passion — is that we try to be everything to everybody, and we are not. We cannot afford to. Politicians need to define what prisons are here for. Are they just for warehousing? We do an awful lot of warehousing, particularly in reception prisons and for some of our short-term sentences. Some prisons do really good work, but far too many do not. We just cannot deliver what we want to deliver. We are not funded to, and we should not pretend that we are making a difference when we are not. If it is about

warehousing and punishment, then be brave and tell the public. Tell them this is what prisons are for. We are not going to rehabilitate. You will be safe from them whilst they are in prison. But we are not going to make a difference once they are out.

I was hunting around for research to see if prison does make a difference, or if it protects the public. I cannot find anything that says prison protects the public, yet we have a government that is intent on putting as many people as possible in prison, so that the general public think that they are tough on crime. But we are not doing any rehabilitation with many of them. We do minimal stuff, but we are not protecting the public and we are not making the streets safer, we are not rehabilitating people and will probably send them out more dangerous than when they came in. That is the reality of it.

There is evidence that short sentences are less effective than community sentences for reducing reoffending.

So, we need to be clear on what the purpose of prison is. If the purpose of prison is to rehabilitate, then scrap your short sentences and use prison for the really dangerous people, who you cannot possibly deal with in the community. Reduce our population and then the £46,000

a year that it costs to keep an average prisoner, we can use this money appropriately, to make a difference.

As of yesterday, our prisons are running at 99.6 per cent capacity. We are full. All my prisons have been local prisons. The four prisons I have governed, two women's and two males, are full every single night and they are not safe, and struggle to rehabilitate.

You have said that the culture was very hostile to you as a woman, when you joined. How do you think things have changed for women, especially women in operational management, over the last 20-30 years?

I think nothing had changed until recently. We have still got a huge uphill journey. It has always been a battle. Over the years I have seen male counterparts progress because of friendships, allegiances, the masons, the golf club, whatever it may be. You see people doing better than you because they are men. You are equally capable, you know that. I am not just talking about me. I am talking about other women colleagues.

Generally, women are the primary carers of children. And if they want to reduce their hours or compress their hours or leave work early its culturally difficult. It is seen that they are getting an easy ride. I have supported a member of the PGA who compressed her hours and worked one day a week at home. Several her male colleagues believed she was having an easy time, but when we scrutinised all the work that the woman was doing pro rata, she was doing more duty governors than any of the men. But there is this belief that we are being soft on women when in fact we should be embracing a work life balance, flexible work, so we can keep women in the workplace, and keep their careers on track. We still do not embrace it.

And the whole issue of menopause. I was governor of Bristol during austerity in the thick of the menopause. To be honest it was hell. The prison was in a terrible, terrible state, as were many of the Victorian local prisons and suddenly your body and your mind behave like somebody you do not recognise. But with our gender champion being Phil Copple, I think we are beginning to understand that we need women in senior management roles, but there are times where we need to give women support to maintain their careers — during children growing up and the menopause and such like. But we are way off being there and being fully inclusive.

What sort of changes do you think would make a difference?

It is a cultural change that is the issue. We do not need more policies, the policies are there, we read them, we see them. There has to be cultural change and an absolute zero tolerance of not supporting women. The default position is, 'Well, operationally we cannot reduce your hours and we cannot allow you to work one day a week at home. That is it. Operationally, you cannot work part time.'

I wonder if Job Evaluation Scheme is a part of the problem. We have these tightly prescribed job descriptions and Senior Management Team (SMT) structures, and it does make it incredibly difficult for a governing governor to offer, for example, a three-day week.

I agree with you to a certain extent. But when somebody asks to go part time, 'I want to do three days

a week', the default position is no you cannot operationally — but often they have not even tried to advertise the other half of the job. There may well be a woman in a prison close by who would love to go part time. So why not at least attempt to see if we can do this for the individual, so they can job share. If I was in a prison and a member of my SMT said I want to go part time, I would immediately be thinking, how can I make this happen? How can I support this person to go part time so they can manage their childcare? I would look to see how. I do not think we have got that mentality yet. It is like the shutters come down and, 'No operationally we cannot do that'.

I think another thing that has helped us is championing women in the workplace. I am quite heavily involved with Sarah Coccia and Sarah McKnight in championing women in the workplace. We have got two women who are senior leaders and are very passionate about the work that they have been doing. But there is more work to do. I was at a seminar in 102 Petty France. Sarah, and Sarah, and I went and there was one male governor there, a governing governor. There were a few functional heads, all women. And then the rest of the people at that seminar were from headquarters. I think that said it all. And that was only the beginning of this year.

Why did you choose to stand as PGA president?

I was on the NEC from about 2002. The vice president came up around 2010. I was elected, then in 2015 I was elected president. I think it was a natural progression. But I joined the NEC very much from a women's perspective. I wanted to support other women.

Then in 2015, I had a lot of pressure from people: 'You must put yourself forward for President.' But I was Governor of Bristol at the time, and I thought there is no way I could be president and governor of Bristol Prison. I was slap bang in the middle of the menopause as well. So, I left. I said I cannot be governor of a prison, not with the prison as it is now. It would not be fair to the prison, and I just could not take it on anyway.

So, I became the operational lead for smoke free prisons, and I did that for three years from 2015 to 2018. It gave me an opportunity because, for me, headquarters was fairly mundane compared to running

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a prison. But it did allow me to do the President's role and get much more involved in the work of the association. And then we negotiated that I would get some facility time to do the role well.

That's when things really took off, and I was able to support members, to do all the consultation, engagement with headquarters, to do a lot of the networking. I suppose it was for the members to say this, but I feel like I have raised the profile of the PGA.

Is there anything you would like to highlight as a success during your time as PGA president?

If you want to say success is based on something like negotiating a good pay reward package, then I do not deal with that. For me, success is when you manage to get a point out there and somebody listens. That to me is success because people are not interested in prisons. Prisons are not like health or education or transport. I wrote an open letter back in 2015 or 16 when prisons were just horrendous, and I sent it out to the media. The PGA had never done that before. I was driving up from Wales to Bullingdon and my phone kept ringing. I had interview after interview after interview. Because the PGA had never done anything like that before it really hit hard with the media.

And I managed to get a story out about protracted concerted indiscipline at the Mount and as a result I got lots of coverage about the state of our prisons.

And the All-Party Parliamentary Group earlier this year: I got quite a big message out there and had a lot of media coverage saying that we cannot carry on like this, treating our prisons as political footballs.

And what have the challenges been?

I think it is difficult to get our ministers and secretaries of state interested in us as a trade union. We have had the odd very good relationship — Rory Stewart, for example, he was very interested in prisons, and we saw him regularly. But we just do not seem to have any kind of interaction at all with our political leaders. For instance, we never met Dominic Raab.

And what are the biggest wins that we could secure over the next 3-5 years to improve conditions for the people who live and work in prisons?

We need to reduce our prison population. We absolutely must do this. We cannot just keep putting more and more people in prison. The cost to the public purse is phenomenal. We do not make our communities safer by doing it.

I do feel sorry for everybody in the organisation if I am honest — that is from Amy and Phil downwards — because we are at the will of our political masters. That is why we are in the position we are in.

I would love to sit down with the Prime Minister, and just say to them, 'Come on, just be brave. Start having a conversation with the public around the use of prisons.' That to me would be the biggest win. If I could persuade a Prime Minister or a Secretary of State to just start the conversation. The narrative could change. And the government — whoever they are — could talk about 'tough on crime' in a different way. If we reduced our prison population, we would make everybody's life in prisons better. I am talking about the people we lock up and the people that work in prisons. The biggest win would be not telling the public a lie that we are being tough on crime when we are not.