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**Where does the prison
system go from here?**

Special Edition

Interview: John Bowers

John Bowers is an ex-prisoner and former commissioning editor for Inside Time. He is interviewed by Maggie Bolger who works in HM Prison Service Training Services.

John Bowers spent a total of 15 years in prison for burglary related offences. He was released from prison for the last time in 1991. In the build up towards and following his release, he worked with New Bridge, a charitable organisation working with prisoners. He started working on their project to produce a national newspaper for prisoners. This started publication in 1991 and was called *Inside Time*. He worked successfully in establishing and developing the publication and between 1996 and 2010 held the post of Commissioning Editor. During that time the newspaper has become established as the leading national publication for prisoners and has expanded from 24 to 56 pages, attracting many prominent contributors. He recently left the paper in order to take up a role undertaking lectures in schools and colleges on the realities of prison and how to avoid becoming involved in crime.

MB: How do you regard our relatively high national imprisonment rate?

JB: I am reminded of a quote from Winston Churchill who said that you can measure the civilisation of a society by how it treats its prisoners. A telling comment at the time and we would do well to revisit that quote. I think the imprisonment rate is a reflection on the British 'retribution' mentality. We love our pound of flesh; some people would bring back the stocks and the gallows. This mentality is constantly fuelled by certain sections of the media with their regurgitated headlines. Let's try and leave slamming individual political parties because I don't think any of the main parties have got anything to be proud of when it comes to our criminal justice system. When New Labour came into power there were 43,000 in prison. Now it's double that number and according to projected figures we are heading for about 95,000 by 2020. So whoever is doing the projecting presumably is of the view that it will get worse before it gets better.

MB: How likely do you think it is that this rate will be reduced? How desirable do you think this is?

JB: Until there is a noticeable shift in the mentality of the general public, and politicians stop being so fearful of the tabloids, it is highly unlikely that we will see a reduction. It is highly desirable that the prison rate be reduced and Ken Clarke seems to have some good ideas. It is easy to be cynical and insist that nothing is

ever going to change. Let's just hope that finally we have a party that means business. I am reminded of Anne Widdecombe's comments a few years ago that what this country needs is a system whereby prisoners get up, they are treated humanely, and they do a worthwhile job and earn money. Unfortunately, in the current climate that is almost cloud cuckoo land. To me it is so blatantly obvious that what we need within this criminal justice system are men and women doing a good days work and earning a good days pay; getting used to the work culture. Unfortunately, it took me a lot of years to get used to that culture because I had been so entrenched in committing crime. When I talk in schools, I explain that crime is like a drug, it's an addiction. We have thousands of people who are basically 'crime addicts', to add to all the other addictions they may have. They simply cannot stop crime without suitable interventions. It is as powerful as smoking, drugs, drink or gambling. I couldn't stop, I needed help; I needed to want to stop and so it is with thousands of men and women. From letters that I used to get on *Inside Time* there are an awful lot of men and women who want to stop, yet they just don't know how. They get discharged with £48.00 and in 2 or 3 weeks they are back in prison again or they are back in their old ways. It is almost an inevitability that they are going to go back, so how do we stop this trend, and is that the Prison Service's fault? Well I don't think it is actually. The Prison Service does what it can. They take people from the courts and look after them with humanity and care and then basically they pray. They pray that these people will leave the gates and not reoffend, yet statistically they know that 6 out of 10 will come back. With young offenders it is 8 out of 10. I find it appalling that the public don't throw out *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* and actually start thinking for themselves instead of allowing their thought process to be dictated to by the media.

MB: Do you think that Britain is a broken society and to what degree do you think prisons can contribute toward addressing social problems?

JB: I don't think it is a broken society, but it is becoming ever more fragmented. How can prisons effectively contribute towards addressing social problems when the damage has already been done? All that prisons can do is just 'contain' for a period and then trust to luck. I think prisons pick up the pieces and do

their best to glue people together again with whatever resources they have got at their disposal. We all know they just do not have enough resources. I think the Prison Service does its best with the tools that it is given.

MB: Ken Clarke wants a rehabilitation revolution really, how possible do you think this is?

JB: I think it is wonderful sounding rhetoric. It sounds great doesn't it? Yet they are cutting back on resources and spending. So how can you have a rehabilitation revolution with even less money than you've had in previous years? Do we want a revolution or do we just want an application of common sense from politicians — who should stop looking nervously over their shoulders at the media and wondering about the vote. I do like the way that this new coalition is going about their business and it all looks good, but then it all looked good when New Labour came to power and they said they were going to do away with private prisons. Thirteen years later, what has happened within the criminal justice system? Has Labour got anything to be proud of? Doubling the prison population is their legacy. This 'rehabilitation revolution' could sound really stupid in a few years time. They will be saying 'what revolution?' Lots of initiatives appear good and politicians are wonderful with sound-bites and meaningless rhetoric and I have had a life-time of listening to them. Ask the prison officer and ask the guy in cell C4 in Wandsworth what has happened over the last few years and they will probably say they have cleaned the recess and the classes aren't too bad, but plenty might change because of the cutbacks. So how can we possibly move forward to this 'revolution' with less money to spend?

MB: How do you think the prisoner experience has shifted in the last few years?

JB: Very difficult to tell without actually being on the landings. All I can do is quote from my experience with *Inside Time* and the hundreds of letters that it gets every month. I think the general consensus is that things have changed for the better, but there is still a long way to go, especially as far as this wonderful 'through-care' and 'after-care' is concerned. Probation's main function now is protecting the public, as opposed to looking after the prisoners' welfare. Once upon a time I went to my probation officer for constructive help; now I'll go and he will warn me to keep to the

conditions of my parole licence otherwise I will be recalled to prison. Personally, I just don't see the prisoner experience changing that much. If you take whatever the percentage of the Prison Service budget is, then things are going to suffer and that includes levels of activity, time unlocked etc.

MB: What do you regard as being the biggest problems in the prison system?

JB: *Inside Time* gets a lot of letters about prison officers treating inmates with a lack of respect. I am not blaming prison officers entirely, because I think a lot of prisoners have a terrible attitude towards prison staff. Time and time again I witnessed certain prisoners whingeing about staff treating them in a certain way and I used to say to these people, 'hang on a minute, how do you treat staff?' I quite often saw new prison officers come in, they smiled at prisoners and they were very respectful towards them but then six months later they were in with the dinosaurs in the tea-hut screaming about prisoners, because slowly but surely the prisoners had eroded the respectfulness out of them. They join the 60 year-old prison officer culture which is to bang them up ... 'out of sight out of mind'. It needs an attitude shift both ways. Similarly, how can prison officers or prisoners work together in a place that's seriously overcrowded? I often describe prison wings as zoos, and that isn't any reference to animals, it is a reference to the hustle and bustle of everybody going at a hundred miles an hour but actually getting nowhere.

MB: What do you see as the major obstacles towards prison reform?

JB: Public perception, the media and the politicians' stereotypical stance on what should be done with those who are sent to prison. The public's perception is to lock them up and throw away the key. What are prisoners doing with pool tables and plasma TV screens? I regularly see this stereotypical view of prisons and prisoners regurgitated. If only the public would stop and ask themselves why these people end up in prison in the first place? Let's get them when they are young and stop them from going to prison, and if they do end up in prison, what can the system do of a constructive nature to bring down this rate of 60-70 per cent re-offending? A lot of the public just shrug their shoulders and say it is not my problem, and to a degree I can understand that. If you have got your

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mortgage to pay, kids, job and your personal problems to think about, why should you have to worry about criminals and prisoners? In my view, you should think ... 'well, I should worry because this is one of the biggest social problems that we face'. Most things are solvable with pounds, shillings and pence. The prison system is suffering through lack of resources. Yet if you doubled the resources would this actually make a lot of difference? At the end of the day you are talking about shifting attitudes and perceptions, you are dealing with human beings. You are not running a business, but it has become a business. In fact a couple of years ago I recall a guy writing to *Inside Time* asking how many people were employed looking after prisoners. There are judges, magistrates, prison officers, administration staff, I stopped at a quarter of a million. This is a valid point, because prisoners keep a quarter of a million people in gainful employment. Society doesn't like criminals and we don't like people in prison and yet they almost have a vested interest in keeping prisons. I fell for it for 15 years and gave a lot of people gainful employment and have they appreciated it?

MB: How do you see the idea of this 'Big Society' impacting on prisons?

JB: What exactly is meant by 'The Big Society'? Can you enlighten me? This lovely phrase 'The Big Society' is yet another Cameron sound-bite from his manifesto. However, if this 'Big Society' idea creates an attitude shift it could well impact quite considerably on prisons. When Labour came into power the prison population was 40,000 — now it is over 80,000. Why does it need to be 80,000? Surely this 'Big Society' should be aiming for a reduction to 70,000 and then 60,000 and ultimately only keeping people in prison who really need to be there, not the mentally ill and the inadequate.

Inside Time receives many letters from prisoners who say they are fearful of release. They are being released in a couple of weeks and should be ecstatic, but are not. They are thinking: 'I have been fed and clothed, I have my friends, I have my tobacco and I have my little routines — why am I going out there to face what can be quite a hostile and scary world?'

MB: Scary?

JB: Yes, it can be very scary to a person being released from prison. When I came out in 1991 I was totally determined to go straight. I had lost much of my powerful physique, yet fortunately that power seemed

to have shifted to my brain. What I have had since 1991 is a very powerful mind that was determined never to go back inside. Apart from one or two friends and the New Bridge organisation, I have done everything myself. I am determined that I am never going back to prison. Yet I don't think that a lot of people in prison are that mentally strong and so, to return to Cameron's 'Big Society', they need the 'Big Society' to help them. Instead of spitting in their face, prisoners need the public to say: 'I will shake your hand. Tell me why you did it and why you think I should trust you? Then I will give you a chance'. We need to get through to society that although a lot of prisoners have done some bad things, they are not necessarily bad people and when does society say: 'OK, you were a bad person, you are not bad now?'

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Bearing in mind that I have not stolen a thing for 25 years, I am still branded by a lot of people as 'that ex-criminal', and they don't want to talk to me, they don't want to know me. That's not self-pity — that is an inescapable fact of life that I still find hard to live with. But a lot of people still look at my record and still compartmentalise me as a totally bad person who will never change. I can't do anything in my defence; a criminal has no defence. You can't try and justify crime; you can't condone what you did. Instead of kicking a

person while they are down, society could metaphorically help them up. Let's hope that this 'Big Society' idea works, or is it yet another sound-bite like 'rehabilitation revolution?' I am available to the Government for sound-bites if they want, because I have got some crackers lined up!

MB: Are there ways in which you think the charitable sector and citizens can make a new and different contribution to prisons and rehabilitation?

JB: They have been making a good contribution for years, but the problem is that a lot of prison service personnel tend to view them with scepticism and cynicism. They are treated as 'do-gooders', which unfortunately some of them are. They can't make a new and different contribution; all they can hope to do is chip away and change attitudes. I often resented going into prisons as part of the New Bridge organisation where there was a look of patronising contempt on the faces of certain gate lodge staff, as if to say ... 'here comes another bunch of do-gooders. These people will never change, don't you

understand?’ At the time, staff didn’t know I was a former prisoner. Unfortunately, some of them are members of the do-gooder brigade; I do have to say that. They are people whose lives are perhaps lacking a lot of things and they want to be appreciated in life — and so they gravitate towards perhaps one of the most vulnerable sections of society, which are prisoners, and who naturally lap up the attention. The charitable sector and ordinary citizens can make a lot of difference, although they do have to be viewed in a different light. They have to be viewed as people who can make a real change and real impact, not just do-gooders coming in once a week and the ‘butt’ of prison officers’ jokes in the gate lodge.

MB: Prisons have an extensive system of managerial monitoring and regulation, including key performance targets, audits, inspection and surveys of staff and prisoners. Is this affordable or necessary? Should prisons be the subject of deregulation?

JB: Over the years I have watched this extensive system of managerial monitoring and regulation and I think it has become a bit too much. We are not dealing with a multi-national business, we are dealing with people; human beings. But of course the Prison Service is now a business; it is run on business lines. I think you do need targets, but we have now gone way over to the other side. It’s all about ticking boxes. Prisoners are pretty shrewd, they know which boxes they need to tick in order for them to be able to progress through the system. So, it is almost a reciprocal arrangement whereby the Prison Service is saying: ‘we need you to help us tick a few of these boxes ready for the audits and inspections. Behave yourself and we will tick the appropriate box or boxes that will move you on’. When you say delivering more for less, it’s forcing people into a corner where they are almost panicking now to deliver a certain amount and then being told ‘thank you very much, but next year you have got to deliver a little bit more with less resource’. Paperwork takes up a lot of the prison officers’ time. Is it necessary to have them scribbling half the day when they should be out on the landings? You need paperwork, of course you do, you need audits, but it has just gone crazy.

MB: What role should the commercial sector have in imprisonment?

JB: I have heard people say for years it is not acceptable that shareholders or indeed anyone should profit from human misery. My view is that it doesn’t matter whether you are in a public or private sector prison — you are still going to be miserable. You have human misery in both and if Doncaster, as opposed to Wandsworth or Wormwood Scrubs, can actually say to prisoners, ‘we can give you housing and a job’, is there

anything wrong with that? If I was a shareholder in Doncaster or Dovegate, or any other private prison, I will get my dividend and make a profit. Am I making a profit from prisoners’ misery or am I making a profit from a business that is being run better than it was previously? If any public sector prison is being run on Doncaster’s level, then the whole service would be far better for it. The public sector just does not have the money that Serco has, so the thought of the public sector ever getting Doncaster back is unthinkable. Has the private sector got an unfair advantage? Should we be doing what Labour did and do a u-turn? Before they were elected, they said they would do away with all the private sector prisons, and then they doubled them in a couple of years. Should the idea be to run 142 prisons on private sector lines and invest more in them? But, what are the return

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rates for HMP Doncaster? Are they better than the public sector? I don’t know. Then there is the experience of staff because those in private sector prisons are paid less. A lot of them do not have the necessary experience; so is it a case of the prisoners running these prisons? I suppose if it’s working at Doncaster, and the prisoners are having more say than they do in the public sector, what is wrong with that? Has the public sector got a lot to learn? Let’s take Doncaster as our example. Has the public sector dinosaur been asleep for so long that it needed a good kick from the private sector to wake it up and say ‘this is the way forward ... we do have the experience ... we know how to handle prisoners’, but do they? They get the kid from Tesco and 5 minutes later he is wearing a prison officer’s uniform. It is funny in one respect, but if the kid from Tesco can come along the landing and talk to the guy in the cell, become friends, then that officer

is going to benefit more than the officer that is bashing the door in the prisoner's face. All roads lead to respect and attitude. If the attitude is better in private sector prisons, then I'm all for it.

MB: There are plans to freeze public sector pay and make fundamental changes to pensions and employee benefits. What impact is this likely to have on existing prison staff and for the future workforce?

JB: It is the same for Prison Service employees or any other organisation. If you are going to freeze pay, you would hope that professionalism would override anger. However, it is almost natural that your work would suffer. You are not going to give a hundred percent. There is going to be a lot of resentment. I don't think Prison Service staff will leave in droves, but I would be quite angry if I was in their shoes. How it will affect the future I really don't know; I am not overly qualified to talk about the conditions; that would be more a question for the affected prison officer to answer.

MB: How do you think industrial relations in prisons are likely to develop over the next four years?

JB: For a lot of years it has been like a game of football between the two opposing sides. I think the POA must still live in the dark ages and they use any opportunity to advance the cause of their members. In my role on *Inside Time*, I have personally asked them over the years to clarify statements or to comment on issues and have not even been given the courtesy of a response. It's almost as if they have got a sort of arrogance about them that says we are not going to answer that question because it is beneath us to talk to a prisoners' newspaper. It would be nice to think that industrial relations would develop with these two teams; the POA and management actually working in tandem instead of against each other. They should both be going for the same ends. I can't see why the POA need to be as obstructive as they have been in the past. I say come out of the dark ages, sit down and work together. If there are going to be problems with the government's spending review then you are both

going to suffer but you are going to suffer more if this friction continues.

MB: During your time as Commissioning Editor on *Inside Time*, what were some of the issues and concerns raised by prisoners?

JB: The paper frequently highlights constructive comment from serving prisoners in relation to how the problems within the criminal justice system can best be resolved. These are the people that know the problems, they live every day of their lives with them and I think politicians and the Prison Service would do well to read *Inside Time* on a regular basis. Prisoners want to be treated with more respect by prison staff — you treat us with respect and we will treat you with respect. Indeterminate Public Protection is another massive bone of contention. It sounds great to the public but the services aren't there to meet their needs. They should have thought about it properly. If the courts are going to sentence this amount of people to IPP then we need to have a structure in place to properly accommodate them. Other big issues concern release, employment and accommodation. If you've lived a certain life, then you need support to develop responsibility. We talk of a 'Big Society', but it doesn't yet know it's brief. The issues concerning lack of employment and accommodation are as pertinent now as they were

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in the 70's and 80's.

MB: You've recently left *Inside Time* in order to do more diversionary work with young people in schools and colleges. What contribution can offenders or ex-offenders make to this?

JB: I am aware of deterrent initiatives within certain prisons that allow young people to come inside and see for themselves what prison is really like and talk to serving prisoners. There is nothing like first-hand experience. Despite the current recession, perhaps more ex-prisoners could be employed travelling round schools to enlighten on the reality of prison life or to deter impressionable youngsters from embarking on lives of crime. It costs in excess of £40,000 a year to keep a person in prison — so why not try to deter youngsters from crime in the first place?