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Where does the prison
system go from here?

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Prison Governor

Dr. Peter Bennett is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill and is interviewed by Jamie Bennett who is Centre Manager at IRC Morton Hall.

Dr. Peter Bennett studied South Asian History and Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He went on to carry out fieldwork in central India for his PhD, publishing a book and several articles on caste and sect¹. He joined the Prison Service as an officer at HMP Birmingham in 1983 followed by positions as governor grade at Everthorpe, Hull, Moorland and headquarters. He has been Governor in-charge at Nottingham, Wellingborough and latterly at Grendon therapeutic community prison and Springhill open prison. He has been Chair of the Perrie Lectures Committee and is a Director of the Koestler Trust and a Director of the New Bridge Foundation.

JB: From your perspective, what are the effects of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison? What are the consequences for you of prisons being full?

PB: I believe that we lock up more people than we need to. Not that in any way I am an abolitionist, although I imagine a day when abolition might be possible, rather that imprisonment should be reserved for the worst offenders posing a risk of significant harm to the public. During my career I have experienced an alarming and unnecessary rise in the prison population during which time the punishment element of sentencing has increased and the rehabilitative element has progressed but at a slower rate than it could have. Other than not making economic sense, it decreases opportunities to focus on the positive side of criminal justice; changing lives and encouraging good citizenship. Inevitably if prisons are over full, there is a dilution of resources to fund effective rehabilitation and resettlement regimes. With regard to offenders identified as likely to benefit from particular offending behaviour programmes, we are currently experiencing a degree of stagnation as it becomes increasingly difficult to allocate places when courses are full and waiting lists are lengthening. But as Governor of Grendon, I am pleased to say that I have been spared some of the pressures of over crowding, largely because I have been able to demonstrate that to increase the population of this therapeutic community prison or to take too many prisoners at a time would have a serious adverse effect on the maintenance of a safe and trusting environment which is essential to the practice of good therapy.

Fortunately, senior Prison Service managers have listened to the argument and responded sympathetically.

JB: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world that the prisoners you work with come from?

PB: I am always intrigued by politicians' constructs of society, whether that is the 'big' society, or 'broken' society, or indeed an outright denial of the very existence of society. I suppose the idea of a broken society is a convenient way of saying that things have gone terribly wrong and the new regime knows how to fix it. It is all very facile. Society is highly complex and subject to continuous change. An ever-changing and uneven distribution of wealth and power leads to areas of deprivation, temptation, ambiguity and tension which are often linked to increased criminal activity. The prison population at Springhill reflects diverse social backgrounds, including prisoners from deprived neighbourhoods as well as professionals from the worlds of business, finance and politics. At Grendon therapeutic prison, however, there is a preponderance of men from dysfunctional family backgrounds, particularly those who have suffered traumas during childhood arising from neglect or abuse. My experience of therapy at Grendon over the last decade has convinced me of the close link between abuse and neglect within the family and subsequent criminal behaviour and therefore of the effectiveness of group therapy as a means of addressing such profound and traumatic experiences and ultimately helping men to change their lives for the better. Perhaps my experiences also suggests that the family ought also be targeted more than it has been as a focus for crime prevention, but this raises more political issues about intrusion and the 'nanny state'.

JB: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment, drug use and family breakdown?

PB: One has to be realistic here by acknowledging that prison can exacerbate individual problems, but having said this, prisons are not only about trying to mitigate the harmful effects of imprisonment per se. I don't think I could have continued working in prisons and maintaining a commitment towards reform and rehabilitation from within unless I thought that we could make a real difference. Prisons can provide the

1. Bennett, P. (1993) *The Path of Grace: Social Organisation and Temple Worship in a Vaishnava Sect* Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation.

time and space as well as the support and encouragement to help men and women confront their problems and improve their lives. As I speak today I can't help but consider how the greater proportion of my time as Governor is spent in maintaining and continually seeking to improve regimes geared to resettlement and rehabilitation in which prisoners can engage with future employers, study for educational and vocational qualifications, seek support from drug counsellors, benefit from courses in parenting and participate in family and children's days.

JB: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for prisoners to make positive changes to their lives?

PB: My background as a social anthropologist has always provided me with a rationale for the process of imprisonment which is pertinent to your question. Imprisonment is a rite of passage, a prolonged liminal stage between a forced separation from society to eventual reintegration back into society. Rites of passage are typically status changing and life changing events marked by a liminal stage where the individual is vulnerable to good and bad influences, traditionally forces of good and evil. The social metaphor is apt. prisons are potentially dangerous places where life choices and influences can be harmful or can lead to self improvement in preparation for release. What we have to ensure as practitioners is that the harmful effects are reduced — self harm, violence, drug misuse — and the positive impact is increased by maintaining a healthy regime that enables the prisoner to engage voluntarily in life changing pursuits. As a therapeutic prison, Grendon is remarkable for the reduced levels of bullying and self harm, rare resort to the use of force, the integration of sexual and non-sexual offenders, the absence of a segregation unit and the extremely low levels, in fact non-existence, of drug use. A prison like Grendon provides a safe and trusting space and an opportunity for prisoners to begin to make changes to their lives.

JB: The Government wants to achieve what it is calling a 'rehabilitation revolution'. From your point of view, what are the areas where more

could be done to help prisoners go straight on release?

PB: I very much welcome the Government's emphasis on rehabilitation, a term which had for a time dropped out of favour but which has now itself been rehabilitated, and could prove to be a potent message, albeit 'revolution' is rather grandiose. As for helping prisoners to go straight, I'd like to see greater emphasis on the last of the three stage rite of passage described earlier, that is reintegration back into society. Much more is being done than ever before in preparing prisoners for release, particularly initiatives to improve outside agencies in helping prisoners to resettle and to gain employment, for this is not just the job of the Probation Trusts. We are increasingly securing positive contacts with employers and educational institutions, mentoring schemes and other forms of support for prisoners and ex-prisoners are proliferating, helping prisoners to desist from reoffending. But more than this, I would like to see a clear and sincere acknowledgement by society that once a prisoner has served his or her sentence, he or she is accepted back into society as a citizen with the full status of a citizen and without the stigma that customarily attaches itself to the 'ex-prisoner'. Criminologists such as Shadd Maruna have identified this need for what in effect is a ritual of reintegration where desistance is reinforced by the ex-prisoner defining himself and being acknowledged by others as a law abiding citizen².

The readiness to accept this notion of full and complete reintegration should underpin all rehabilitation initiatives.

JB: What kind of work or training do you think could be introduced to prisons?

PB: I think there are many highly innovative and relevant examples of work and training already in prisons. At Springhill I have been impressed by my staff and prisoners who have linked up with a range of agencies to set up work and training opportunities. These include prisoners serving the community by working for Oxford Citizens Advice Bureau, a farms and gardens project developed with Aim Higher and supported by Lottery funding training prisoners in

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2. For example see Maruna, S. (2011) *Reentry as a Rite of Passage in Punishment and Society* Vol.13 No.1 p.3-28.

horticulture and growing produce to sell to local restaurants as well as to replenish the prison kitchens, and a training centre shared with Northern Gas and taking on prisoner apprentices as well as non-prisoners who train on the site. What is important, however, is that Governors are allowed space to be enterprising, that profits are not appropriated and needs assessments are conducted on a regular basis to ensure that the work and training provided is of relevance to the job market. The future looks promising.

JB: Would you welcome the opportunity for prisoners to 'pay something back' to the community for their crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting their victims?

PB: Forgive me if I introduce another three-fold social principle, one that is fundamental in all forms of social exchange and that integrates societies universally; the obligation to give, to receive and to repay. I would say that there is a corresponding three-fold principle which reflects the negative side of exchange; that is the tendency to take illegally, which leads to the victim's expectation of repayment or recompense, which is fulfilled by the perpetrator's making repayment or restitution to the victim. This seems to be the rationale underpinning restorative justice, and one that I support, particularly in as much as it brings to the fore the plight of the victim and helps him or her in coming to terms with a particularly traumatic life event. It also helps the perpetrator in a sense to atone for his or her 'sins'; to reform. As such, I believe that initiatives which are seen as a form of payback are to be preferred precisely because they satisfy a universal expectation of justice, whose outcome can be immeasurably more positive than punishment alone.

JB: How has the prisoner experience shifted in recent years?

PB: During my 28 years of working in prison, the most noticeable change has undoubtedly been the improvement in the treatment of prisoners and the impact of the decency agenda. But I have always acknowledged that as a Governor, my understanding of prisoners' experiences is inevitably vague and partial, indeed that is why I have always advocated and

supported research in prisons which goes beyond the routine statistical kind and digs deeply into the social and cultural life of the prison. Ethnographic research reveals so much about prisoner society that is normally hidden from view and an understanding of which is essential if we are to develop truly positive rehabilitative regimes. I was particularly pleased therefore to have the opportunity to support Ben Crewe in his research when I was Governor of Wellingborough. Ben's recently published book, *The Prisoner Society*³, provides a rare and fascinating view of what goes on in prisons and particularly of how the prisoner experience has changed over a period corresponding to my career experience from the overtly brutal and fearful to the more subtle pains and frustrations of the modern prison as the carceral experience becomes less directly oppressive but more 'gripping' and 'tight', demanding more and risking less. Nevertheless the pain of imprisonment persists.

JB: How have prison-staff and staff-prisoner relationships changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?

PB: This is an issue that is dear to my heart and I can't do full justice to my thoughts but I will say a little on how staff-prisoner relationships can be improved. In recent years I have been fortunate enough to be Governor of a prison where staff-prisoner relationships are extremely positive, indeed praised as 'positive' and 'outstanding' by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. I was initially sceptical as to whether examples of good practice at Grendon could be introduced to other prisons, arguing that such seedlings of humanity are unlikely to take root unless they have similar therapeutic structures in which to germinate. However, some two years ago I was asked by the Director of Offender Management for the South East Region to lead an innovation project on improving relationships and offender engagement in the South East prisons. One initiative was to involve staff and prisoners at Grendon in distilling aspects of the regime with a view to exporting them to HMP Isle of Wight. The results were recently published in an article in the *Howard Journal for Criminal Justice*⁴. I believe they can provide a useful template for improving regimes. But it was not only about Grendon, last year I organised a

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3. Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Bennett, P. and Shuker, R. (2010) *Improving Prisoner-Staff Relations: Exporting Grendon's Good Practice in Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* Vol.49 No.5 p.491-505.

conference for all South East prisons which focussed on a wide range of potential initiatives including the development of prisoner councils and other ways of delegating greater responsibility to prisoners. Governors have all submitted action plans that are all being reviewed regularly by the new Deputy Director of Custody. It is difficult to assess the success of this project. I have a day job and limited resources and have not been able to pursue it as much as I would have liked but I have noted a deep surge of interest in the project with some encouraging signs, not least the excellent achievements at the Isle of Wight with its lively prisoner councils and the benefits of arranging several exchanges between staff at Grendon, Parkhurst and Albany.

JB: How has the experience of working in prison changed in recent years?

PB: Audits, inspections, performance targets, risk assessments, traffic lights, emails, emails and emails.

JB: What are the aspects of working in prison that people outside are least aware of?

PB: Generally people are naïve in their understanding of prisons. To some extent that is inevitable, after all, prisons are closed institutions set apart from society, but they are also depositories of stereotypes. Those stereotypes are by their very nature resilient to change, particularly when many journalists and politicians find it more dramatic to employ them for communicating sound bites and messages. I suppose that people are least aware of all the effort which goes into maintaining rehabilitative regimes and the fact that most prisons are for most of the time far less oppressive, brutal and violent than people would expect them to be.

JB: An increasing number of prisons are potentially to be managed by private companies in the near future and there will be potentially wider opportunities for the voluntary and charitable sector. What are the benefits and risks of these changes for you?

This is a rather sensitive question to ask a Governor at the moment so I will be circumspect. It goes without saying that there are massive potential benefits by involving the voluntary and charitable sector as long as developments are carefully regulated, particularly given that the management and treatment of prisoners is a serious responsibility of the state. The same goes for private prisons.

JB: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system?

PB: One of the biggest problems is what might be called logistics. That is the difficulties in allocating prisoners to the right prisons, programmes and courses. Another problem is those prison staff who do not subscribe to rehabilitation.

JB: What are the things that get in the way of prisons being more like you would want them to be?

PB: As above and also over full prisons or over sized prisons.

JB: If you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service, what would it be?

PB: Downsize it, streamline it and focus on the custody and rehabilitation of those assessed as being most harmful to society, develop alternatives to custody for the rest.