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Governing Governors

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Despite their key role in shaping prison life, prison governors have been subject to considerably less research than prisoners and uniformed staff.¹ While a number of governors have written memoirs about their working lives,² none have done so recently. Dilulio's *Governing Prisons* — a book which has been highly influential in the US — is a text about governing, rather than governors per se, while Rutherford's *Criminal Justice and the Pursuit of Decency* constitutes an analysis of working 'credos' or orientations across the criminal justice system, and although scholars such as Julian Le Grand have written about public service reform in ways that are highly relevant to prisons, the wealth of literature on changes in management structures in healthcare and education have not been matched by studies of the changing organisation of prisons.³ The exceptions to this pattern — including work by Bennett — are well represented in this volume.

Our own contribution to this area of research is based on two connected studies. The first took place between 2007-09, as part of a broader research project on values, practices and outcomes in public and private sector corrections. One part of this project was an analysis of the motivations and professional orientations of senior managers working in both sectors, involving 90 long, career-biographical interviews with a range of practitioners, including governors and private sector directors, (what were then) area managers, and a few informed outsiders. 16 of these interviews were with representatives from the private sector.⁴ More recently, in 2013, we were asked by NOMS to contribute to the 'Role of the Governing Governor' programme by undertaking a smaller study, with some revised questions to supplement those we

asked in our original study. For such purposes, we have so far undertaken 28 interviews, both with governors who were already known to us (some of whom we had interviewed before) and with some who are new to the role or whom we had not encountered previously. Among the questions we asked are: what are the new demands of the role, how is it changing, and — perhaps most fundamentally — what is it like to be a governing governor in a rapidly changing organisational, financial and political context?

In neither of these studies have we sought to empirically answer the question of what makes a good governor, although this is a question that is often asked of us, and one on which we have an informed position. The difficulty in answering it is that it is far from easy to know what 'good' is, or to identify the right 'outcome measure'. Good governors are not simply those who are successful within the organisation, since the organisation may have blindspots and biases. Nor are good governors always to be found in high-performing prisons — indeed, the opposite is sometimes the case, since skilled managers are often sent into the most difficult establishments in order to make headway in improving them. Furthermore, the definition of 'good' might depend on the particular needs and culture of an establishment, as much as the qualities of its leader. This does not mean that we have nothing to say about what constitutes good governance; only that what we say is tentative, and that, in our research, we are just as interested in describing the general characteristics of governors, the nature of their role, and the ways in which they relate to the organisation and it relates to and 'governs' them. We have carried out other related research which addresses the leadership style and effects of individual Governors (or the trajectory of individual establishments) and we often draw on these findings as we develop our current thinking about the

1. For exceptions, see Bryans, S. (2007) *Prison Governors: Managing Prisons in a Time of Change*, Cullompton: Willan, and Wilson, D. and Bryans, S. (1998) *The Prison Governor: Theory and Practice*, Leyhill: Prison Service Journal publications.
2. For example, Clayton, G.F. (1958) *The Wall is Strong*. London: John Young; Grew, B.D. (1958) *Prison Governor*. London: Herbert Jenkins; Kelley, J. (1967) *When the Gates Shut*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
3. Dilulio, J. (1987) *Governing Prisons: A Comparative Study of Correctional Management*. New York: The Free Press.; Rutherford, A. (1993) *Criminal Justice and the Pursuit of Decency*. Winchester: Waterside Press; Le Grand, J. (2003) *Motivation, Agency and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens*. Oxford: OUP; Le Grand, J. (2007) *The Other Invisible Hand: Delivering Public Services through Choice and Competition*. Princeton University Press.
4. More can be read about some of the findings from these interviews in the following publications: Liebling, A. and Crewe, B. (2012) 'Prisons beyond the new penology: the shifting moral foundations of prison management', in J. Simon and R. Sparks (eds.) *Handbook of Punishment and Society*. London: Sage; Crewe, B. and Liebling, A. (2011) 'Are liberal humanitarian penal values and practices exceptional?', in Ugelvik, T. And Dullum, J. (eds.) *Penal Exceptionalism?: Nordic Prison Policy and Practice*. Cullompton: Willan.

changing role of the Governor in contemporary corrections.

In this article, we therefore present a number of observations about prison governors and prison governing, as well as some brief reflections on the components of good leadership.

Governors are emotional about their work, and wish the organisation were more emotional about them.

Almost all of our interviews, during both research projects, have been undertaken in Cambridge, over a sandwich lunch, with both of us present. The location seems to enable interviewees to obtain some distance from their everyday working lives and to open up to us about their professional lives.

We have been struck by the number of times that our interviewees, including a number of men with reputations for toughness and personal fortitude, have found themselves tearful or choked up when describing their career experiences and feelings about their work. Typically, these emotions have come out in discussions of the personal and professional toll of dealing with difficult staff members or POA committees, or perceived mistreatment by the organisation. Some interviewees have described facing extraordinary levels of personal abuse and hostility from staff, including the circulation of rumours about marital infidelity, accusations of paedophilia, and the vandalism of personal property (e.g. cars). Many of the women have been demonstrably upset and angry about their treatment, both as officers in a macho occupational culture, and as senior managers (see below).

Meanwhile, in describing their orienting values and career ambitions, many interviewees communicated a clear emotional investment in certain kinds of aims: a striving to please or prove wrong parental figures; the desire to become a number one governor ('realising my dream of Governing my own prison'), particularly of an establishment which they had worked at early in their career ('I just thought I would love to be able to go back to XX as governor'); and the prioritization in their work of stamping out abuses of power ('I always want to challenge bullying ... I hate it, I react to it'). Many of those who had left the public sector to work in private prisons spoke in explicitly emotional language about their decision:

Many of the women have been demonstrably upset and angry about their treatment, both as officers in a macho occupational culture, and as senior managers.

Q: Had you always been committed to a career in the public sector?

Yeah and I cried myself to sleep the last day, I went down to London to give my phone back and stuff like that and went home and cried myself to sleep that night.

Emotionally it was quite hard to leave the prison service because it was a family that I'd kind of grown up in but ... not much of a family, a bit of dysfunctional family [laughs] when no-one really loves you [laughs] that much.

I wasn't sleeping — for three or four days. I love the Prison Service. I love the colleagues and the networks.

In the current operating climate, governors are also describing the emotional impact of trying to do a good job: sleepless nights, personal stress, and the knowledge that everyone is carrying more risk:

Q: And what kind of toll does it take on you personally to be surviving in this environment?

It is not hours. It is the emotional drain and the complexity and difficulty with human relations, and the worry you have about

the people you lock up every night. You worry about your staff and you worry about your management team.

The significance of these emotional dimensions of the governing task is twofold. First, the academic literature on 'managerialism' presents management as a matter of systems, logistics and information flows: essentially rational and mechanical processes. Yet this is inconsistent with the essentially human aspects of managing and being managed by *people*, in which decisions, experiences and — as we suggest below — career development are shaped by emotional investments and responses, and by interpersonal loyalties and conflicts. Here, then, an interviewee reflects on the relevance of emotion management to the governor's role:

There is a much more human aspect to managing change than there is to managing compliance. [...] what's underlying that is

people feeling uncomfortable about a change which they feel is being imposed. So it's all about the human emotions of it. [...] You have to try and acknowledge and understand, and at least to some degree accommodate, people's feelings about it. So that does seem like a different... require a different approach, and a different set of skills.

Helen Arnold has shown that a characteristic of high-performing prison officers is that they have high levels of both emotional awareness and emotional independence.⁵ This means that they can identify what they are feeling and why, but are also sufficiently controlled not to let their emotions overwhelm them. Something similar may be relevant for governors: that is, to do the job well, they need to take seriously the emotional dimensions of their work, be attuned to its responsibilities, and be able to express their emotions (indeed, we have seen governors benefit from wearing their hearts on their sleeves, in full staff meetings, for example). But they also find ways of 'switching off' their emotions, at the end of the working day, and of avoiding battles that are trivial or based on pride or ego.

Second, as an organisation, the Prison Service and the culture among governors seem uncomfortable in acknowledging the emotional dimensions of prison work and the importance of being attentive to the emotional needs of its senior staff. While some interviewees have described having strong support networks among their peers, most have said— like prisoners, and prison staff — that showing emotions to their peers or expressing self-doubt is 'taken as weakness'. In other words, governors rarely talk to each other about the personal and emotional experience of their work, and many feel that such conversations are not enabled by the wider organisation:

One of the things I struggle with a little bit in [my region], is I don't find there's all that much scope to have those conversations about how things are. Much less about how we are feeling. [...] There just doesn't seem

to be much space given to that. And I don't feel like we are given much opportunity to really share.

Similarly, a consistent criticism of the Service arising from our interviews has been a lack of 'personal touch', or a kind of carelessness in the way that it treats some its key personnel:

What I really wanted was for [my Deputy Director of Custody (DDC)] to turn around and say, 'You've worked really, really hard, thank you' and I didn't feel I got that.

It was very arbitrary. It was like: 'we are removing you as a governor. I was called to London and then told to catch the train home and clear my desk the next morning. [...] I wouldn't have treated anybody who works for me that way. And it was devastating...

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This is not to say that governors feel unsupported by their line managers. Most have said the opposite — that their relationships with their DDC are strong and trusting — and some have certainly recounted times when they have received 'personal phone calls' at critical moments, as well as more

mundane forms of care. However, most interviewees have drawn a distinction between forms of managerial support, and something more akin to 'emotional intelligence'.

In the interviews that we conducted several years ago, many of the people we spoke to who had left the Service explained that they did so because they felt that no-one cared about their individual needs, and some outstanding Governors (whose departure constituted a significant loss to the organisation) claimed that they would have stayed in the public sector had they received a personal phone call from a senior member of the organisation. For example:

Had [senior person X] phoned me and said: 'I've heard that you're leaving please don't go, we want you to do this job and it might

5. Arnold, H. (in press) 'The prison officer', in Jewkes, Y., Bennett, J. and Crewe, B. (eds.) *The Handbook on Prisons* (second edition). London: Routledge.

be in six months time, hang in there', I would have stayed.

There are echoes in such criticisms of the ways that prison officers expect their governors to 'look after' them, and we are not suggesting that the Service has such a duty in practice or that it does not seek to meet it. Many governors are highly competitive, and are reluctant to show their emotions in front of their peers or managers, so there is an unresolved question as to how receptive governors are to precisely those forms of support that they say they are missing. It is the case that organisational 'respect' matters and is related to valued outcomes, like commitment, loyalty, and hard work. It is telling that many staff at all levels of the organisation (though perhaps decreasingly — see Bennett, this volume) conceive of it as a kind of 'family', with its implications of nurture and mutual obligation.

The organisation, and governors' experiences of it, is gendered.

In our interviews with senior female practitioners, one consistent narrative has been the experience of having to deal with 'predatory men', and the perception that such men are tolerated by the organisation so long as they are rated as governors:

The problem is, people openly talk about, 'Oh, he's a bit of a ladies man', but it doesn't stop them from being promoted. [...] Predatory, macho, testosterone-fuelled, beer swilling, rugby playing men.

Implicit in such discussions is the issue of whether 'operational grip' trumps 'moral leadership' in decisions about promoting and protecting some men, with 'moral leadership' defined here not just in terms of the promotion of decent prisons, but also personal behaviour. Much of the recent organisational reflection about such issues — both formal and informal — has centred on the activities of some specific male governors and their relationships with junior, female staff. In this regard, the Service seems to have experienced something of an awakening about the cultural waters in which women in the Service are forced to swim in order to survive and thrive. Historically, women have not been well represented at the most senior levels of the organisation, and when we undertook our first set of interviews, it struck us that a disproportionate

number of people who had moved from the public to the private sector — and had subsequently forged successful careers — were women. Many talked positively about the experience of being female in the private sector, comparing their experiences favourably with those in the public sector.

I don't think the [public sector Prison] service treats women that well, I think it doesn't understand how to treat women and I think it is still very male, and I think it's done a lot of soul searching about race and a lot of work around that, [but] it's done none around gender, and it doesn't ask itself questions around how it treats women, and it doesn't ask itself questions about why people like me leave.

The wider issue here relates to a particular kind of masculine culture among some governors...

The wider issue here relates to a particular kind of masculine culture among some governors, 'managing from the pub and the curry house', which may also marginalise certain kinds of men. According to a number of our interviewees, this culture also leads to some men being 'protected', despite inappropriate behaviour or poor performance, because forms of male camaraderie make them effectively 'bulletproof'. Such a

culture is encouraged by a discourse of 'manning up' and a particular interpretation of terms such as 'resilience', which most of our female interviewees have found alienating, and no doubt many men do too. It is significant that many of the most successful female Governors are very highly rated by their staff, but somewhat invisible to those higher up in the organisation when we ask for examples of outstanding leadership.

This raises a related issue: the importance of patronage in determining career success. Being favoured or disfavoured by a Deputy Director of Custody, or being under the wing of a senior governor, can be career defining, and some governors and directors report having to move regions or sector in order to find recognition. Again, this suggests that prison work — like work in almost any sector — is about emotions, affiliations and affinities, as well as rational decision-making. These informal dimensions of organisational dynamics are double-edged. One of the perceptions that has been expressed more often on our recent interviews than in previous years is that promotions are not always transparent:

There's too much looking after the 'right people' — favoured people, given good jobs. It's not transparent, or consistent with the values being espoused at the top

I don't necessarily think the processes are always transparent, [...] There's always been an issue about transparency and we always get told it is an operational necessity that people get moved to this jail or that jail, and everybody understands that. But I don't think it explains necessarily the way we do things. [...] And I think it is annoying too, because we wouldn't get away with it at a local level, and yet it seems to be okay at top level sometimes.

As suggested in these quotations, such processes matter because of the messages they send about the organisation. Governors talk to each other about who is promoted or removed from post, and interpret the Service on the basis of such decisions. They also evaluate the integrity of the Service according to how they believe it treats and promotes the people within it.

Prison governors cannot do their job by the book, and good governors do not try to.

In *The Prison Officer*, Liebling and Price⁶ argue that prison officers do not do their job 'by the book'. Instead, because of the number and complexity of official rules and practices, their work involves the selective enforcement of the rule book and the use of intelligent discretion as to what rules to enforce, at what times, with which people. The same is the case for all frontline workers, or what Lipsky refers to as 'street-level bureaucrats',⁷ who have to deal with a vast range of unpredictable situations, and, in doing so, are the translators of policy into meaningful practice. The predicament described to us by prison governors differs somewhat, in that it reflects the difficulty of knowing what tasks to focus on in the context of intense operational pressure. In our recent interviews, the most common metaphor used to describe such pressure has been that of 'spinning

plates' — the implication being that not everything can remain forever in the air:

I wouldn't say I can't cope, but there's just that many plates to spin, and I think, you know, if I've got twenty plates to spin I can probably spin about twelve of them successfully.

As suggested in the following quote, many governors have reflected on the sheer difficulty of 'making things work' in the current climate:

I feel like I'm someone who can make most things work, and this is probably the first time in my career where I've felt like I'm failing, like I can't make it different or better. [...] I'm reasonably resilient. I'm not shy of hard work. [...] But, however which way I look at the problem at the moment, other than having a few more people, I can't make it work. [...] It does feel a bit like juggling jelly.

...their work involves the selective enforcement of the rule book and the use of intelligent discretion as to what rules to enforce...

The sheer volume of work that governors say they are managing means that one of the challenges of the job is to prioritise, and to avoid being drawn too closely into matters of process at the expense of moral

issues and strategic concerns:

I pride myself in getting around the prison, but actually there's days when I can't get around the prison, because you are tied up. You get tied up with employment tribunals. ... a decision that you can make can then cost you six, seven, eight further days where you should be focussing on prisoners. [You get] caught up in the change, the finances, all that sort of stuff.

There's a danger that by getting sucked into the operational stuff, [governors are] sucked onto the dance floor instead of being on the balcony. And then there's a danger that some of the bigger stuff, the more strategic stuff, doesn't get sufficient attention.

In part, what we are highlighting here is that governors need to distinguish between 'noise' (that

6. Liebling, A. and Price, D. (2001) *The Prison Officer* Leyhill: Prison Service Journal.

7. Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service*. Russell Sage Foundation.

is, the deluge of policy directives and the sheer weight of operational demands that they confront) and 'message' (that is, the set of values and objectives Good Governors are able to hear and communicate key organisational messages above the volume of all else that is occurring. They do not follow rules slavishly, or pursue performance targets as an objective in itself, recognising that prisons that perform well on MQPL measures are not always the most rule-compliant establishments. Instead, they are willing to sacrifice 'performance' for the sake of moral outcomes.

What this means in practice is that good governors are somewhat under-compliant. Certainly, in a climate in which governors have reduced professional discretion but are no less accountable, it has become difficult for them to discharge their duties without deviating from formal policies and structures. Some governors are engaging in forms of 'creative compliance', in which they operate in accordance with the organisation's stated values, but in a way that is not completely consistent with its procedures. As suggested in the first quotation below, this requires considerable personal confidence and an intelligent reading of organisational risk.

I do feel as though I can get away with things [...] partly reputational, and partly because I'm trusted. But I'm not sure that everyone would get away with it, or have the confidence to do it, actually.

What is it that gives you that confidence?

I'm not breaking any rules, and I know where the risk lies, and I'm telling the right people that I'm doing it.

I've just talked about integrity, haven't I, and playing by the rules. And here I am [finding] a way of getting round and subverting it. I think I could do it legitimately. I mean I can justify it to myself.

You're being creative.

I'm being creative. I'm doing it within the rules, performance recognition rules. But yeah, officially I can't temporarily promote this person to cover that role.

As also suggested above, one of the things that enables some governors to act in this manner is a relationship of trust with the people above them.

Trust matters

Focussing primarily on staff-prisoner relationships, Liebling (2004) has described prisons as essentially 'low-trust' environments. It is striking, then, that in our recent interviews with governors, trust has been among the most consistently discussed themes and preoccupations. To a large degree, this reflects the kinds of changes in the role of the governor to which Bennett refers in his article in this volume:

Some governors are engaging in forms of 'creative compliance', in which they operate in accordance with the organisation's stated values, but in a way that is not completely consistent with its procedures.

[By] taking away our ability to manage our finances, for example, then setting all the management structures for us. I understand why we had to do Fair and Sustainable, but there isn't any movement in there. There is no wiggle room. They've standardised our budgets, and every year that goes by they are taking more and more to the centre. That really does make you feel as though they don't trust you, and there are probably all sorts of organisational reasons why they are doing that.

It is an environment where you put somebody in charge of a prison and yet they can't actually decide how many pairs of boxer shorts a prisoner can have. It is ridiculous.

So do you feel your room for manoeuvre or discretion as a governor has been curtailed?

Yes. In all those areas where I could have more of a say or an influence over things that prisoners could benefit from: how they can order their canteen, how much private cash they can have. All those things where you can actually make a practical difference to the kind of domestic aspect of [prisoners'] lives, have been eroded.

As expressed here, one of the unintended consequences of ensuring compliance and minimising organisational risk has been to make governors feel less trusted. To be clear, most interviewees stated that

they felt trusted and supported by the specific individuals who line managed them, and by the Public Sector Prisons (PSP) Board. They also recognised the need, within the political and economic climate, for some level of centralised control and budgetary restraint. Their discomfort was the outcome of an organisational logic that was organised around 'risk' and compliance. Risk-thinking has an economic logic, being about the calculation of possibilities, based on aggregates and probabilities. In contrast, trust-thinking has a humanistic logic, and a moral or relational dimension, as in the bond between a child and a parent, because it assumes moral integrity in the person to whom trust is given. To some degree, then, risk and trust are in tension, and it is this tension that prison governors are currently trying to negotiate. For many, the feeling of not being trusted as a professional serves to compound the frustration of having less power to do the job:

The system we have does disempower people. [...] It's very frustrating to be told 'you can't' [recruit a new administrator]. [...] It does feel like you're not trusted.

Problems of risk and trust are critical in relation to the management of prisoners, needless to say, and it is increasingly clear that the 'placing of intelligent trust' is important throughout the organisation if risk is to be managed and reduced rather than inflamed. Governors and prisoners seem somewhat preoccupied with this tension. At a whole organisation level, the problem of balancing risk with trust needs attention. Prison officers take their cue from above. If Governors do not feel professionally trusted and supported, they withdraw their best professional uses of discretion from the landings.

Governors have power as symbols and moral translators.

While our recent interviewees have consistently complained about reductions in their discretion, some (more than others) have acknowledged their continuing influence as symbolic and moral figureheads. Governors who are fairly new in post have described a realisation not just that 'the buck stops' with them, but that their acts and statements carry enormous consequence, regardless of whether they intend them to:

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When you're the governing governor, every contact does matter ... [staff] hold what you say with importance you are quotable even when you're on the loo.

If you walk past it and don't correct it, nobody else behind you will do that, so it sits on your toes as governor.

Governors are hyper-visible. One interviewee described to us a day when he accidentally slammed his car door in the prison car park, and was asked by his PA as soon as he reached his office what had put him in such a bad mood. Prison staff do not always do what governors wish, but they observe them closely, and seek to interpret their preferences and priorities. Good governors recognise this aspect of their power, and make deliberate use of it through high-impact symbolic acts (queuing up with prisoners to taste their food, for example). They also act as moral translators and boundary-setters, specifying the kinds of behaviours that they want to encourage or will not tolerate, providing examples of what they understand by 'decency', and reminding staff of the experience of imprisonment:

I say to the court escorting staff, 'just think, you know, she's come out of Prison X, she'll have had 40 minutes in that van, she wants to go to the toilet because she forgot [to go before leaving], and she didn't get her fags, and she can't smoke in the van or in the court, and [so] she's going to be stroppy, and you don't have to tolerate stroppy, but there's a way ... you know, and just understand that frustration ... I know some of you are [smokers] and you're out there quick enough aren't you, when you want to smoke, so [think] how she's going to be...'

Such examples foreground prisoners' humanity, conveying a message that they are fundamentally the same as any other citizen. This ability to keep in mind the prisoner as a fully sentient being, and to convey to others what it might feel like to be imprisoned, is characteristic of many of the best governors we have interviewed. Yet, as a senior NOMS practitioner outlined to us, some years ago, it can be placed at risk by an excessive emphasis on performance and delivery:

There's less mavericks than there used to be and with that I think you do lose some of the custodial care elements. That doesn't mean governors don't care; they do care a lot. [But] I think there's a tendency for them to value performance a bit higher than other things, which is a worry. [...] Governors will think they're being successful if they manage to implement the core day, get the savings out, get the Unions to agree the profiles, not have too much prisoner kickback. They'll say 'I've delivered it for you'. I don't think we always think [about] what it feels like to be told 'right, you're going to be locked up on a Friday night for the next thirty years'.

Concluding comments

It used to be said that prison officers were the 'invisible ghosts of penality'.⁸ The upsurge of interest in prison officers means that this claim applies much more now to prison governors than to uniformed staff. Studies of prison management are few and far between, despite the fact that the role of governors in shaping the quality of life in prison is crucial. Their abilities, interpretations of their role, and the values

they bring to it, influence life in an establishment to a very significant extent. Much more attention could be paid to succession planning, to the matching of individual governors to particular establishments, and to the understanding of the skills and abilities of those who perform exceptionally well. The role of the governor has changed with the onset of managerialism, financial accounting and perhaps especially performance measurement, since the days of charismatic 'mavericks' and individual 'fiefdoms' described by Jacobs during the 1950s and by Adler and Longhurst and others during the late 1980s.⁹ It remains the case, however, that personal and moral qualities remain critical to the art of Governing. The best governors seem to combine humanity with professionalism, and to like, and see the best in, prisoners and staff, whilst retaining a sharply well-developed sense of what can go wrong. This is highly skilled and demanding work. It is moral and emotional as well as bureaucratic work. Infusing management with moral leadership takes qualities of character and leadership that 'show up' and make a difference in better and improving prisons. We have tried, in this article, to offer some informed reflections on the contemporary role of the governor, and hope to develop our analysis more fully in the future.

8. Liebling, A. (2000) Prison officers, policing and the use of discretion. *Theoretical Criminology*, 4(3): 333–357.

9. See Liebling, assisted by Arnold (2004) *Prisons and their Moral Performance*. Oxford: OUP.