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

Special Edition

Interview: Crispin Blunt

Crispin Blunt MP is Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Prisons and Youth Justice. He is interviewed by Jamie Bennett who is the Governor of HMP Morton Hall.

Crispin Blunt became the Member of Parliament for Reigate in 1997 and since May 2010 he has been the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Prisons, Probation and Youth Justice within the Ministry of Justice.

He served as an army officer until 1990 before he entered politics. Between 1993 and 1997 he acted as special adviser to Malcolm Rifkind in his roles as Secretary of State for Defense and Foreign Secretary. Whilst in Opposition, he held shadow ministerial briefs covering Northern Ireland, Trade and Industry, and Home Affairs and Counter-Terrorism and has worked in his party Whips office. He has also been a member of the House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee.

In his current post at the Ministry of Justice, he is responsible for prisons and probation, youth justice, criminal law and sentencing policy and criminal justice.

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

CB: It is evidence of failure. First the level of crime is too high and we have failed to address that as a society. Second, we have a high number of people circulating around our system as short-term prisoners where their rate of reoffending is twice as high as those serving community sentences. This is evidence of our failure to effect rehabilitation.

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

CB: The job of the Ministry of Justice is to incarcerate those who are sentenced to imprisonment by the courts and we cannot completely predict that. What we have done is make assumptions about the future direction of policy, in particular reforms that will be presented to Parliament in the Sentencing and Rehabilitation Green Paper later in the year. That has informed our Spending Review bid and we have therefore made an estimate that the prison population will be 3,000 fewer by the end of the Parliament. However, these things are inevitably estimates.

JB: Is Britain a broken society and to what degree do you think prisons can contribute towards addressing social problems such as poverty, unemployment, family breakdown and anti-social behaviour?

CB: We have a major social justice agenda to address and rehabilitation of offenders is a key part of that. That is why I sit on Iain Duncan Smith's Cabinet Committee on Social Justice. If one looks at the life cycle of an offender, for all too many people it is predictable from the circumstances that they grow up in that they are going to get into trouble with the justice authorities as they get into their teens and progressively as they become men. That path people take is far too predictable. As it is predictable, we should be able to divert people from it with more intelligent policies, particularly around early intervention. That is where there is going to be a significant focus on the social justice side. Our work on early intervention should not be seen as separate, in that sense, from the work we are doing with payment by results as part of the rehabilitation revolution.

JB: To what degree do you think it will be possible to achieve a 'rehabilitation revolution', significantly reducing reoffending, given the current squeeze on resources?

CB: We have to because the position we are in now is not acceptable. We have to find a way of doing it despite the squeeze on resources. There are two principal ways in which that will happen. The first is what the state does. We need to get much cleverer about how we deliver our services as a government. That is principally through locally delivered services and locally delivered interventions to offenders. It is about getting all services, whether that be local authorities or health services, delivered more effectively. They need to be more co-ordinated and delivered together. We as the state need to do what we do better. There are some good examples to build upon such as what has taken place in Manchester where local authorities have got out of their silos in order to look at the overall objective. The second element is that there is a large capacity in this country of groups and individuals who think it is the right thing to do to help rehabilitate offenders. We need to make sure that all of those people, in the voluntary and private sector, are engaged to help us. If we do that we can then grow our capacity for rehabilitation. We have to do that because if we don't grow our capacity for rehabilitation, then it won't work.

JB: How do you think the actual prisoner experience has shifted in recent years? How is it likely to change in the next few years?

CB: I sincerely hope that they will see an improving service in prisons as far as their futures are concerned. If we have prisons where they are more focussed on being a working environment and where their time is being put to constructive use rather than simply occupied, then we will be better preparing prisoners for their life after prison and giving them a better chance of being effective members of society. At the same time we will be enabling interventions to be delivered to prisoners not only on release but also being prepared for release along the lines that we are seeing in the pilot scheme at Peterborough.

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

CB: Delivering effective rehabilitation and breaking the cycle of reoffending.

JB: What are the major obstacles to prison reform?

CB: Silos. It goes back to the issue of growing capacity. We have to incentivise people to work together in the wider interests of successful rehabilitation. For example you have to make the Housing Officer of a local authority, who is under no statutory obligation since a prisoner makes himself homeless by getting himself imprisoned, to play his part in the wider agenda of rehabilitating that individual. That is an example but it applies to every other service delivered to an offender. We work too much in silos and we don't bring together our services to effect a rehabilitation.

JB: How do you see the idea of 'The Big Society' impacting on prisons?

CB: The rehabilitation revolution will be an early demonstration of how effective the big society can be. There are so many people that want to get engaged with the Ministry of Justice, the Prison Service and the Probation Service to help us in the rehabilitation of offenders. If we can make a success of that, by making it easy for people to help us and over time grow that capacity, then that will be an active demonstration of the big society. If we don't change our systems and incentives in order to make it

easy for the rest of society to help us with the task of rehabilitation then we won't succeed. In that sense the big society is essential to what we are trying to achieve.

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

CB: What will be definitively new is that we want to achieve that through social investment and payment by results. That will be new. I am told that the Peterborough model is the first of its kind in the world.

We will be looking to have a whole number of pilots and pathfinders that draw on that model when we publish the Green Paper. We then want to learn the lessons from those pilots and pathfinders. That is all new. If we are able to actively engage the voluntary and charitable sector to be part of the suite of interventions that every individual needs in order to turn their lives around, then we will much more effectively deliver our rehabilitation objective.

JB: In relation to payment by results, one of the questions raised by the Young Foundation, who developed the concept of social impact bonds, was whether there is actually a market for these? Whilst there are people interested in investing in a pilot, is there enough of a market to cover 140 prisons?

CB: I hope we are going to find out what the size of the market is. One of the particular challenges to us is to get the economic modelling right, looking at what we are going to pay against. If we can get this

right then everybody wins.

JB: 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?

CB: The general direction of travel of the new administration is to trust professionals, localise and reduce the burden of inspection and audit. Having said that, prisons will always be a particular area where you would want a level of inspection and oversight because

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you do have people deprived of their liberty in closed institutions.

JB: What role should the commercial sector have in imprisonment? Should they run prisons? Should they provide rehabilitation services? Should they provide support services?

CB: We now have a mixed economy and there is no suggestion that is going to change.

JB: Do you see an expanding role for the commercial sector?

CB: We are not in a position except to extract the best value for money for the taxpayer so in the end the key judgements will be around how we can deliver the services we have to in the most efficient way.

JB: To what extent do you think private sector competition has altered the terrain of imprisonment?

CB: The evidence seems to be that it appears to have raised the game of the public sector, in particular in terms of the public sector's own economic efficiency.

JB: 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?

CB: No one in the public sector is immune from this and everyone is going to be treated in the same way. There is nothing here that distinguishes the Prison Service from other parts of the public sector.

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

CB: I hope they will develop constructively. Being faced with a particular challenge, I was pleased to see the POA recognise that in a response they made to the Spending Review and I hope we can go on and maintain a constructive engagement in order to ensure that we all achieve what we would like.

JB: Do you think that is how it is likely to develop over the next four years, more constructive engagement?

CB: I certainly hope so.

JB: How should prison professionals make their voices heard in the current debates about prisons and imprisonment? Is anyone listening?

CB: I am certainly listening. I engage on a regular basis with the trade unions but there are a number of different professional representative bodies to which people belong. I am also conscious that carrying all of the people that work in the Prison Service with us is very important.



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