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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Life sentence prisoner

Jim Simmonds is serving a life sentence and is interviewed by Margaret Adams who was a prison manager.

Jim Simmonds is a 50 year old unmarried father of two children. He is a life-sentenced prisoner with a tariff of 4 years and 6 months in respect of his most recent offence of armed robbery. He has served almost a decade in prison for this sentence. He has served four previous custodial sentences spanning a 26 year period

MA: 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?

JS: For me, I think it is an unstable environment because there seems to be no direction at the moment. My sentence doesn't exist anymore. IPP sentences¹ were brought in in 2005 and things have been rearranged twice since then. I am part of a 'forgotten group of people' because IPPs are being prioritised, but this is wrong. I know there is a build-up of IPPs in Cat B prisons. Some of these are really dangerous people but some of these are young kids learning tricks and traits to survive in prison.

I have noticed a really quick turnover of prisoners now. For instance there have been five different Servery Lads on my wing in two months. We've got category B and category C lads here because it's about 'heads on beds'. Previously staff had more time to assess you against set criteria. They could monitor your demeanour and assess changes and things like victim empathy, all of which would be taken into consideration before you could be downgraded. This used to be done by a dedicated group of staff who got to know you. Now because of policies and budgets governors have staff doing other things. For instance staff are being used to do the census, and the prison closed down to do it. Prisoners like me, IPPs and lifers would rather have a lockdown to get our reports done. My Board is nine months late.

MA: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world you come from?

JS: No. I was damaged goods long before they even thought of the 'Broken Society'. My MP knows nothing of the real people of the constituency, apart from what he gets in his surgery. He is a barrister — not many off my estate became barristers! My role models were builders. Now I am too old for certain jobs.

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

JS: Yes, especially with family interaction. There is a family link worker to help with Family Days and Lifer Days and more family friendly visits and access to visits. On the downside though there are too many departments now. We used to have the old SWIP officer² who knew your wife and they knew the landings and people on them — what was going on in their life. Now it's too impersonal, and things get missed.

In terms of unemployment prisons could be better if they opened up and took more contracts right across the full prison estate, more like the private sector. Campaigns to close down so called 'Noddy shops' miss the point. Yes, you can do the work blind-folded but it is a work routine and gives you more responsibility getting up and going there every day. For some people it stops them thinking about other things like harming themselves. A company came in here and gave me a guaranteed interview — the first I had in 20 years!

More needs to be done with transition to open conditions though to overcome the 'culture shock'. You need to have faith and build up a relationship but that doesn't happen now you have to start over again with people who don't know you. After 10-15 years in closed conditions you have to do things you never had to do in 15 years like finding the dining hall — panic could set in. It is good that Risley is now linking with Thorn Cross because it helps with that transition from here to there with the same staff and governors.

I also think more needs to be done before release to prepare life sentence prisoners for modern life. When I was sentenced you didn't have phones with cameras; or tills in supermarkets where you do it yourself. Everything is IT now to do with shopping. Even alcohol and drug awareness is different these days. A lot is said about money management but when you manage on prison wages it is not about understanding money management it is about the choices people make about how they spend their money.

Since the changes to housing in 2010 you can't have permanent housing. Long term prisoners will not be aware of this.

1. Indeterminate sentences for public protection.

2. Social work in prisons.

IDTS³ is the worst thing they ever introduced for drug addicts. It gets abused and people just maintain a drug habit in prison. They could be on a £10 bag outside but tell the doctor they are on a gram a day. They just get what they ask for and end up getting out with a 50ml methadone habit. They even get zopiclone just to keep them quiet. There seems to be a different rule for IDTS. It should be more about recovery than maintenance. There is no incentive in the Lifer system where you are supposed to do what the system wants. You can do what the system wants and don't get the reward whereas with IDTS you can carry on with a drug habit and still get on. A lifer could do 21 years on IDTS avoiding adjudications throughout.

MA: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for you to make positive changes to your life?

JS: It makes it easier to look at yourself. There are too many distractions outside and you get caught up in the utopia of being 'top dog'. We live in a throwaway society.

MA: 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?

JS: Using prisoners as mentors and ex-users to challenge drug addicts would help. Companies need to take a chance on people. Probation need to do this more. They need to use sanctions at first as a support for instance as part of a licence condition you should help others before getting to the next stage. This helps you to get self-respect and self-worth back. I also think that there should be more real life information for academics and professionals who set things out in policies but don't really understand the reality of people's lives.

I came into prison age 24 and I am going out at 50 years old with short periods of being out in between. I had a probation officer who was relaxed and wanted to be my friend not my probation officer. I needed a short rein — I needed to be managed. I knew I could get away with things so it didn't do me any good to have someone like that then. There needs to be a balance between what it was like then and

what it is like now. You can't get appointments easily now because caseloads are so high. They don't really have time for you and probation officers always look tired. This is no good for long term prisoners who need some sort of halfway house — not a hostel, which houses people from court on bail because there is too much coming and going. They need a keyworker who can help with links to other services like the local authority and Jobcentre Plus and MAPPA⁴ services. There needs to be an advocate role.

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

JS: Work and training need to go hand in hand like fork lift truck training and then using them in workshops. Public prisons are too restrictive. Governors should be given more leeway to use things like the textile shop to make a range of stuff and set up social enterprises to sell on visits etc. Government purse strings are the stumbling block. An example is the staff mess can only now use the national contract for supplies. Kitchen managers used to be able to innovate and subsidise but they can't anymore.

MA: Would you welcome the opportunity to 'pay something back' to the community for your crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting your victim?

JS: I wouldn't have a problem saying sorry to my victim but under the Victim Charter and the victim's impact statement I have agreed not to contact them or even enter my old town, which means I can't even go to visit my parents grave. I agreed to this because they didn't deserve what I did to them and they shouldn't have to worry about bumping into me in the street when I get out, so I accept that is a consequence of what I did.

I would like to work with the handicapped or elderly but the voluntary and community sector can't take me on because of my offence. I would also like to speak to students and professionals to help them get a taste of reality by giving the user perspective. If I was younger I would build a youth centre. I worry about young people I see coming in here. They need something to do but their way. They have a whole new language and outlook. Kids can't be individuals.

They need to use sanctions at first as a support for instance as part of a licence condition you should help others before getting to the next stage. This helps you to get self-respect and self-worth back.

3. Integrated drug treatment services.

4. Multi-agency public protection arrangements.

They have to be part of a 'pack' and they get caught up in things and end up here.

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

JS: Prisons are warehouses now with a conveyor belt system. They have introduced telephones and TVs but before that you had to interact. Prisoners and staff don't know how to interact now. Prisoners used to have radios so there was more exposure to culture because you would listen to different programmes on at different times of the day. I used to listen to Radio 4. I even went to see *Les Misérables* once when I got out because I had listened to it on the radio. I really enjoyed it. It's not something I would have done before.

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

JS: You don't get any continuity with staff on the wing — it is different staff all the time. But staff also need to drop the barriers a bit. They should be able to think for themselves. It needs to be built into their training that they can interact without being unprofessional. They don't seem to be willing to engage and build on their insight. They are afraid to take that step because they are so security conscious and are wary of breaking a confidence about themselves.

MA: What are the aspects of being in prison that people outside are least aware of?

JS: They don't know the background circumstances of why someone might be in prison, 'There but for the grace of God' for some people. Just look at the Cumbria killings where he was wrapped up in his feelings but before he snapped and did that everybody liked him. If he had just killed himself people would have said 'what a shame we couldn't do anything about it'. You don't always have to break before you can be mended! Besides punishment people also need to be helped, more restorative approaches.

Prisons could interact more with the local population to see the regimes are not just about playstations and pool. They should understand the trauma, the impact of self-harm and deaths, and daily interactions. Victims should be allowed to see what the prisoner has done to turn things around.

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MA: 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?

JS: The benefit is that prisoners can earn more money however the cost is that you can be in a lot longer because your paperwork doesn't get done. I am a commodity and to keep me the private prison earns £80-£100 per week. As a lifer I provide them with a guaranteed income. In my experience the public sector is good at paper trails and routine and having my paperwork done is important to me so public is better than private. The private sector offer window dressing through individual benefits to regimes.

It is good that the voluntary and community sector are getting involved particularly if they team up for aftercare and throughcare planning. As I said earlier halfway houses run by Langley Trust and Phoenix House resulted in fewer people coming back into prison. There is also scope to get the charity sector involved in the prison maybe opening up a sort of Grace Brothers providing clothes for discharges or making things to sell in charity shops outside. At this prison we have the cycle workshop which is a charity.

The problem for the public sector is that it is not allowed to do things differently and the public sector always has to deal with difficult cases so I'm not sure that they have the leeway to compete on a level playing field with the private sector.

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

JS: Underfunding, you can't keep robbing Peter to pay Paul. There is no funding for a victim awareness course, so if a judge or the Parole Board want that course then progression doesn't happen. If there is a smash-up, a cell is out of action until it is repaired which costs money. Constant watches cost money but you can't set that because it's unpredictable.

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

JS: Red tape — forward thinking and progressive governors have ideas but these are stifled by protocol,

procedures and procurement. For example we hire a contractor for food. Six months ago there were fewer foreign national prisoners so more space was used for European food with no flexibility meaning there was less available to respond to the increase in foreign national prisoners. In the past you could get E45 (skin cream) from Healthcare now it's an added expense to be paid for.

More power should be given to local managers. Probation and prisons should be the Parole Panel not the Ministry of Justice because they don't know the day to day happenings in your life.

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

JS: Open it up to society more. If people could see where the money was going and how it was being spent it would go back to rehabilitation and not warehousing. I will be costing society for the

remainder of my life. Politicians get in the way with knee-jerk reactions to the press, making it difficult for society by inaccurate reporting. A ten year sentence should be broken down into 5 years punishment, 2 years restorative work and 3 years licence period. It would provide clear expectations using a 'carrot and stick' approach. There should be clear targets before prisoners get out and this needs to be explained to probation that handovers are too quick and not inclusive so mistakes happen. If you had a bad time at a particular prison, it doesn't mean you are bad. Probation need to think more about the whole person and not just the process if people are going to stay out of prison. There is every walk of life in prison and the skills should be used to better effect particularly with younger people because it is frightening the extremes that they feel they need to go to find their place in society.

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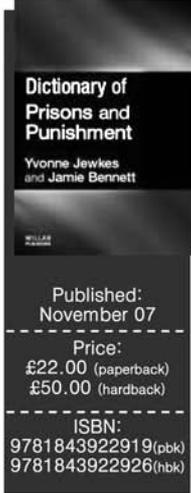
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