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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Prisoner B

Prisoner B was one of the first prisoners to arrive at HMP Isis after it opened. He is interviewed by **Michael Fiddler**, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich. The interview took place in February 2014.

MF: How did you feel about transferring to a brand new prison?

PB: I felt alright. I was probably happy because I was in a jail that was old and rundown and this jail was brand new. I probably felt good at the time because it was local for me. I was in Portland before here and it's like four, four-and-a-half hours away.

MF: What were the differences between Portland and Isis?

PB: Portland had a regime. This jail didn't have no regime when it first opened. This prison was new. There was only like two wings open when I first come in 2010. So, it was all new. There weren't that much staff. It weren't better, but it was cleaner. That was the only better thing.

MF: So, has there been a big difference between then and now in terms of...

PB: Yeah, cos it filled out. It got more officers. They got a regime.

MF: What information were you given prior to transfer and what did you know about the prison when you arrived?

PB: I only knew that it was in London. That's all I knew. They didn't give me no information. They just told me that 'you're getting transferred tomorrow. Have your stuff ready by like 9 o'clock. We'll come get you.' And that's it.

MF: Not the name of the place?

PB: Yeah, they gave me HMP/YOI Isis and it's in South London. That's all they said — it's YOI. Only when I got here that I read some stuff and it said what it's about and all that. But, I got no information prior to coming here.

MF: And you hadn't heard of the place?

PB: I heard about it getting built, but I never heard about it. I heard it was a new prison being built next to Belmarsh. I never heard of the name.

MF: How did you hear about that?

PB: Family. This place was getting built from 2009 or 2008. It took them like two years to build this. And it's local as well. So if you hear about a prison being built, then you probably know.

MF: Compared to your expectations, what was different when you arrived?

PB: I didn't really have no expectations because I didn't really know what it was like. I wasn't really given that information. So, I wouldn't have known.

MF: What advantages and disadvantages are there to being in a prison without any 'history'?

PB: Hmmm, disadvantage: don't know what could happen. You don't know who's there, what it's like. Advantage: it's new. I don't know. I don't really think that there's an advantage to it. There are probably disadvantages because you don't know what prisoners are there, what they're like, what the jail's like, what officers are like there. The only advantage is that it was clean. Most prisons ain't really clean. They've been there for like fifty, sixty years and they're a bit run down and that. But here it's two, three years old. So it's still clean and that. Brand new.

MF: Does it still feel new?

PB: Yeah, it still does.

MF: Did you feel safe when you arrived at the prison?

PB: Yeah, officers there and that, so yeah.

MF: Were there appropriate support measures in place for prisoners when you arrived?

PB: No. Not when I come here. There wasn't even that much officers here. Half of them had just started working in prison. So they didn't even know what to do. They had to get officers from other jails to come and help them sort out the jail, to get a regime. I don't think they knew what they were doing themselves.

MF: Was that an odd situation to be in?

PB: This is my first time in prison so I never knew what to expect. I never knew that I was meant to get help or they were meant to give you sources, to tell you like 'you can do this' and 'you can do that'. I wasn't aware of that. So, if they did give it to me, then I'd be alright. But if they didn't, then I wouldn't know. None the wiser.

MF: Were staff confident in the appropriate use of their authority when you arrived?

PB: I think that they were clueless at the beginning, man. I don't think they even knew what they were doing. We probably had the same amount of knowledge as they had about how to run a prison. All they had was just keys.

MF: Did you find all of the services required for prisoners were in place when you arrived?

PB: Yeah and no. I didn't know what was meant to be there. I didn't know what help I was meant to get. So, anything that I did get, I would have been, like, 'cool'.

MF: Overtime, what kinds of things have become accessible that weren't available when you first arrived?

PB: Everything. Education, sentence plans, everything. 'This' [the interview]. If you'd asked the governor to do 'this' when the prison first opened, they'd have said no. Cos they wouldn't have even known what to do. But, now they do. When it first opened, they didn't have nothing. No education, no nothing. Just nothing. It was nuts, there was just nothing.

MF: What was the typical day like then?

PB: They just give you your association from like 9 to 11. Then you're obviously locked up over lunch. Then you get another association from like 2 to 5. Then you get locked up over dinner. Then another association from 6 to 7. Then the next day. Obviously you get fed lunch, dinner, breakfast, whatever. Exercise in the morning. Now, you wake up, you exercise, you can go education, go gym. Before, when the jail first opened, there was only gym and association.

MF: Was it a big shift to have access to these things? Was it better?

PB: Yeah, it was better. For me it was better because it kills most of your day. If you're out of your cell the whole day on association, on the phone or playing pool or going gym, fine, you've got no worries. All you're going to be doing is locked up for overnight. Obviously now, you're only out for education in the morning from like 9.30 to 11. Then you're locked up from like 11 till 1. And then 2 o'clock to 4, education again. That's your day done. But before, you'd just be out the whole day because they didn't know what to do, innit. There weren't that much staff. It was laidback then.

MF: What's education like now?

PB: It's just like every other jail. It's just normal jail education. I'm an orderly, innit. I'm a cleaner and a server on my wing. So, the last time I was in education was a while ago. I think I was in business studies, but it's nothing to NVQ-level. It's nothing to diploma level. Obviously it's good work. It teaches you stuff, but it's not beneficial education that will get you grades that you can come out and use. You probably have to do like 30 courses here to get enough credits to go starting Uni and then wait another year to start on Uni properly because you have to have a certain amount of credits.

MF: How were staff-prisoner relationships in the start?

PB: It was alright. It wasn't really bad or good. It was just normal really.

MF: What effect did being in a brand new prison have on you communicating with external legal advisors, friends and family members?

PB: Good effect. Because it was local. Cos I was far away before. I was like four hours away and now I'm like half an hour away. So it was probably a good effect. It's easier to communicate, easier for visits.

MF: Was there a full range of purposeful activity available to all prisoners from the first day?

PB: No.

MF: What more could the prison have done before opening to ensure your time there was productive?

PB: Probably have a regime. Probably have something in order ready. Like, have the education ready or something.

MF: So, when you say 'regime', what does that mean to you?

PB: Regime's like, say, they give you a timetable of what times your doors will be open, what time exercise, or education will be. What time your meals will be. What times and what days you're allowed to go to the gym. That kind of stuff. A timetable. But I never had that at first. They just opened the doors and they said 'everyone get [association] and then we'll come back in an hour'. Obviously, they never went nowhere. They would be there,

but in an hour they had to say 'yeah, association done.' Then they'd be like 'get 'em out. [Association]'. It was a disaster.

MF: Why do you say that?

PB: Because they didn't know. When the jail first opened, they didn't know what they were doing, innit. They'd just give you [association]. I've never been to another jail that you'd get three associations a day. D-cat jails, like, open jails, they don't even get three associations a day. When we first come in here, they used to give us three hot meals a day. That's how the jail was before, three gym sessions, three [associations], three hot meals. When this jail first opened, it was good. But it just went bad. They started to fix it up, like. They know what they're doing.

MF: Were adequate resettlement services in place from the start (18.52)?

PB: I didn't even know what that was at the start. I didn't even know what resettlement was. I don't think that was there, but if it was there, I would not have known. I got a long sentence, so I wouldn't even have thought about that until a couple of years later. So, I wouldn't have known about it anyway.

When this jail first opened, it was good. But it just went bad. They started to fix it up, like. They know what they're doing.

MF: But is that something that you're aware of now?

PB: Yeah, I am aware of it now. I've probably known about it for like two years. I was eligible for that, like, last year. But, the jail... even though the jail's got better, it's still, in some departments, it's still bad. That department is bad. Resettlement. All that stuff.

MF: Would it be better to stay here, as it's close to your family, or would it be better to go to a Cat-D?

PB: Way better to go to a Cat-D.

MF: Even if it was further away?

PB: I'd go to a Cat-D if it's where Portland is. Way better. I don't really like this jail, to be honest. I've only been in this jail because I turned 21 last year, so I was still a YO. But, if I had the chance, I would have asked to leave like three years ago. I would have asked to leave a long time ago. But where I'm a YO, they don't really transfer you. So I had to wait till I'm 21.

MF: So, why...

PB: Am I still here?

MF: Well, no! What is it about this particular prison?

PB: I dunno. I read it in something it's a 'gang prison', like it specialises in gangs stuff, gang members and trying to reform them. It's a YO. That's why I don't really like it. Cos an Adult jail and YO jails are two different things. YO prison is just kids that are fighting. They're rubbish. But adult jail, you've got old men just doing their own, no problems.

MF: And you'd prefer to be in...

PB: I'd prefer to go to adult jail any time. If I wasn't going home so soon, then I'd be putting apps in every day to get transferred. But I've been here so long, I can't even be bothered. I've got 6 months left. I'll just do the rest in here.

MF: Did the prison cater for all or some of your sentence planning needs?

PB: They cater for all of my sentence plans. After like 2-3 years, they cater for all my sentence plans.

MF: Can you run me through what they involve?

PB: What, the sentence plan? Say if your charge has got a victim, then you would do a course called 'Victims awareness', where you'll have to think about the victim, of the family, the impact of your crime, all sorts. Then you've got another course called 'TSP' — thinking skills project. Then you've got other stuff, like your probation could give you a sentence plan to say 'don't get no adjudications', no nickings for 12 months

or don't go on basic. Every year they'll come and check your sentence plan. They did do my sentence plan in the end. Now, I've cleared all my sentence plan. I've got nothing more right. So mine's done, yeah.

MF: So did you do the TSP?

PB: Yeah, I done that last year.

MF: What was that like?

PB: It was alright. They just give you booklets to fill out with loads of writing. Makes you write about your crime, what was you thinking of the time of doing it, what are you thinking now? You got to keep thinking of stuff. It's alright though. It's good.

MF: Could you take those skills and apply them in the future?

PB: Yeah, cos it tells you to like think before you do stuff. Or, think of your relatives or stuff like that. Say if you got anger problems, before you'd just lash out and that. But, now you've ridden the sentence, next time, think and then think of your family. Say, if you do get another sentence, what would happen? So, yeah, you could use it in the future. It would be alright.

MF: How was the victims awareness course?

PB: It was probably better than TSP. They brung in a victim. every week for 6 weeks. They say how they felt. Then they show you videos and that. It was alright, yeah. It was good. It just makes you think, innit. It makes you think a bit more about stuff.

It's not just you stuff can affect.

MF: How has the prison changed over the time you have been here?

PB: It got better, it got worse, it got better, worse, better. Yeah, it's rocky. I dunno. At first it was alright. And then, too many fights would happen. They wouldn't know what to do then. They would punish everybody. There'd be no association or there'd be no gym. Like, it's gone better and bad. I don't think the regime is any good in here. Normally you was allowed to get clothes and that sent in as much times as you want. Then they tried to say you're allowed to get clothes handed in on a visit once every three months. Then they tried to say you're allowed to get a post in once every three months. But now they're saying you're not allowed nothing handed in no more. It's nuts. I got my stuff handed in from time ago, before this happened, so I'm alright. I got loads of stuff. But some people ain't got nothing. Like they got one pair of boxers and socks throughout the whole week. I don't really think this jail has got better. For them it has because it's easier to run. We used to get association

Say if you got anger problems, before you'd just lash out and that. But, now you've ridden the sentence, next time, think and then think of your family.

everyday. Now we get it three times a week. Three to four if you're lucky. Used to get gym everyday. Now you get it three times. It's always short-staff or there's always a problem. Weekends, sometimes something happened. Like there could be an alarm bell or there could be short staff. Or the staff have to go help on the visits because there's not enough officers there. Always something. It's the regime again, innit. This regime has never been good in this jail. There's nothing you can really do, innit. So just bide your time and get on with it. It's like that Panorama stuff. You have to come in, record it and see and you'll realise. This is fucked up. If you done that in here, then you'd know what it's really like. They'll say 'ah, there's not enough staff, nothing we can do, stay behind your door'. And then done. Obviously you get fed. I come everyday to clean the wing and that so I'll get my shower, but they'll say to people that's not an orderly 'you're entitled to one shower every three days. By law.' That's what they say. So, yeah. They've always got an excuse. They're never wrong. You have to bide your time and leave it. There's nothing you can do, innit. Cos you're in a jail anyway. So, you can't really complain. If you was in like North Korea or somewhere, you'd be fucked. But you're in a fresh jail, so you get food, there's no point really complaining because nothing's gonna happen anyway.

MF: Do you really think that?

PB: I don't think it would change. Maybe in like five years it would change when it's got proper amount of staff. Since it opened, it's never had a full amount of staff. There's never been a month when there's full staff and everything runs perfect. Like, I'm not really trying to make this place better or worse. I just want to ride my sentence and then get over and done with here. Just move on. Hopefully I never come back to this place. Hopefully I don't do no more crime. This is the first time I've been in prison. I got sentenced to nine years, first time ever. I learnt my mistake. I'm trying to do my sentence and get out of here. I don't want to help this place, I don't want to break this place. I'll tell people how it is. Like, if I get asked a question, I'll tell them the truth about it. Like the jail is terrible, but there's nothing I can do or say that can help it. The only way things get helped is when like something serious happens like someone's human rights get breached and there's evidence for it. Or someone gets hurt or something. So, unless that kind of stuff happens then there's no evidence to put forth to back these up, if you know what I mean.

Since it opened, it's never had a full amount of staff. There's never been a month when there's full staff and everything runs perfect.

MF: Have you been able to get involved in shaping the way the prison operates?

PB: Nah, we've tried to say to governors, can we do this or do that. Can we have like more sessions of gym, but they don't listen. So, nah. Me, personally, I don't know if someone had opportunity to way to shape it round, but I haven't personally.

MF: So is there no mechanism to do that?

PB: No, no prisoner meetings. The only way you could do it is if you complain. Put a complaint form through and then the governor will read it and he'll write his response to you. That's the only thing you could get. It would take like a riot or something for that to happen. And nobody really do that in here. You'd get another charge for that. You get more time. That's pointless. Might happen one day. You never know. But I personally won't be involved in that. I just want to get out of here to be honest.

MF: Do you feel that larger prisons provide the best balance between rehabilitation, efficiency, safety, decency and security?

PB: I dunno. I was thinking about this question. Some ways, yes. Some ways, no. Small prisons, it's easier to control, innit. But a larger prison...I dunno. It would probably be the same way to control because you'll have more staff. This jail only holds 600 people. I don't

know if that's a lot or small to be honest. If it's a lot, then I think larger jails are good. Cos, it's easier. If this is a small prison, then I think small prisons are good. Even though there's no regime, it's still controlled. Like, no one's ever escaped. Officers've never been held hostage. Obviously officers get assaulted, prisoners get assaulted, but there's never been like a major breakdown of the jail where's it got to be sectioned off and everyone's got to be out of their door, counted for. So, I dunno. Big prisons, small prisons, who knows, man.

MF: What would be the upper end, do you think, for a prison if it was large?

PB: Like a thousand or something.

MF: What about a smaller prison?

PB: To be honest, I think a smaller prison would be better than a larger prison. I think more offenders would get more help. Cos there's less people to look out for. If you've got a thousand offenders, you're just going to do it by the book, but if you had like 200 prisoners or 400 prisoners, they get more of a chance to gain something from the prison. Not to come back.

MF: And that would go for all of those things: 'rehabilitation, efficiency, safety, decency and security'?

PB: Yeah.

MF: I went to an American prison with about 2000 inmates...

PB: That's nuts. That's why we're lucky here man. These prisons are nothing like them. Them ones are crazy. No television, they're banged up like 23 hours a day. That's why I don't really complain. Obviously, no one wants to be here, innit. Like you messed up, you done what you done, you're young, but it's not the end of the world like. This [the legal visits room in which the interview took place] could be someone's office on the outside. This room right here. It's clean. The cells are clean. Toilet, sink, mirrors, windows. Can't really complain. I think it depends on people's sentences. But

it depends on the person as well. Everyone's different. I've never had one day where I thought, 'yeah, this is easy, like.' I've never had one day where I think 'man, I can't do this.' I've always just...ride it out. I've never stayed in my cell and been like 'this is easy, man.' It's not easy. Where your family's out there, you've got loved ones and that. It's not just you that you're affecting, innit.

MF: What lessons should prison managers take from opening this prison and what advice would you offer to a Governor/Director opening a prison?

PB: Make sure they have a regime and that education and that is ready from day one. Cos this jail didn't have nothing when they first opened. So I'd just tell them, make sure they know what they're doing. And good luck!