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Interview: Damian Evans, Governor of HMP Whitemoor

Damian Evans, Governor of HMP Whitemoor. He is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Damian Evans joined the Prison Service in 1992 on the Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has worked in a range of different prisons during his career including being Governor of HMP Morton Hall, at the time a semi-open women's prison holding around 400 prisoners, HMP The Mount, a 750 place category C prison, and HMP Highpoint, a 1300 place category C prison spread across two sites.

He is currently Governor of HMP Whitemoor, a high security prison holding over 450 category A and category B prisoners. It has two specialist units, a close supervision centre for those who are violent or disruptive in prison, and a joint Department of Health and Ministry of Justice unit for dangerous people with severe personality disorder.

JB: What led you to prison work?

DE: Partly by accident and partly by design. Prior to joining in 1992 I had been studying (Politics, and then Soviet and East European Politics at Masters level) and then spent some time teaching English in the then Czechoslovakia. When I was back in this country I started to think about my long term future, and saw an advert in a national paper for the Prison Service's Accelerated Promotion Scheme. I always thought I'd go into government / social policy in some way or other and this seemed to fit the bill. As I prepared for the extended interview process I remember reading some prisoner biographies and I became more interested in the concept of the prison, the cultures and behaviours within it, and the problematic issues it raises — it really is at the cutting edge between the rights of citizens and the duties and responsibilities of the state.

JB: How would you describe the role of the Governor? Is it different from other management roles in other organisations?

DE: For me the most important thing is to get an SMT to believe in a way forward and then to get them to work well together. If the rest of the establishment sees the SMT working well together then they tend to follow suit. That's not really different from other organisations, but what does make the prison distinct is that it is one of those organisations which, to lead effectively, you have to be absolutely in touch with

what is happening at ground floor level — because where you have people in an organisation who have power over others, there is the ever-present risk that power will be abused. I'm not talking so much about intentional abuse of power, though that occasionally happens, but human nature is such that there will often be unintended actions or inactions which, put together, can make the prison experience intolerable and unacceptable. We have a responsibility to guard against this, and that requires ongoing vigilance from all managers, including and most importantly the Governor. This is why I have deep reservations about over-sized prisons and the 'Chief Executive' style of governing. I found Highpoint, with its two sites and over 1300 population, to be at the outer limits of what was governable — by which I mean being able to stay in touch with ground level activity. And however a large prison is structured, there is no substitute for the person at the top of the organisation. And performance indicators and audits will only tell you so much. You have to see it for yourself as well.

JB: What do you consider to be the purpose of imprisonment?

DE: I have always believed there is a purpose, confused though it sometimes seems. I don't think any jurisdiction has ever found the absolute answer to this question. It is a mixture of punishment, incapacitation, prevention, deterrence, reform, rehabilitation, reparation, and different jurisdictions tend to emphasise some purposes over others at different times. For me there has to be an element of reform and rehabilitation — from a utilitarian point of view so that when released prisoners are less likely to re-offend, and from a belief that human beings do have the capacity to improve. If I didn't believe in this I couldn't do the job. And it's important even in high security — just because a sizeable number of prisoners may never be released doesn't mean they can't lead decent and productive lives in custody.

JB: What are the most important risks you manage?

DE: In the high security context, holding some of the country's most dangerous criminals serving the most eye-wateringly long sentences, safety and security. And very much connected to these risks is the

part we play in preventing radicalisation and extremism — with a population that includes criminals convicted of terrorist offences and quite a few sympathisers, it is a risk that has to be managed daily at Whitemoor.

JB: How much power do you feel you have to shape your team and the prison? Who do you share power with? What constrains you?

DE: In purely structural terms, I have no power to set my management team. It is prescribed for me, along with my staffing structure. In theory I can pick from a range of job descriptions, but in reality I have very little room for manoeuvre. But I understand the reasons for that: when large organisations need to economise the centre wrests back control. I can also live with it. I deal with the person in front of me and I'm less concerned about the precise role they perform or the exact structure we're operating to.

Why? Because good people will find their way round imperfect structures, whereas even if you had the most perfect structure in the world (you never will anyway), if you don't have the right people it still won't work. On that note I do wish as an organisation we were a little less obsessed with structure!

It's also important to say that, in spite of the degree of central control these days, there is still enormous scope to shape your prison — the priorities, values and culture within it. That is the essence of governing.

JB: What role do you have in shaping the experience of prisoners? Do you have much interaction directly with them? Has this changed in recent years?

DE: As I've indicated in earlier answers, you can shape the experience of prisoners and influence them. That comes about by talking to them on the landings, in the workshops etc. And sometimes you will need to get closely involved in their matters of concern, such as a complaint or a sentence planning issue. The important thing is to judge when it needs your personal involvement. I also place a huge importance on attending prisoner consultation meetings: it says a lot to prisoners when they see you are interested enough to spend a couple of hours with them. Finding the time is difficult, but each Governor has to judge what are his or her priorities.

One of the most frustrating things about dealing with prisoners is the very limited scope you now have to make a material difference to their lives, in matters such as canteen, private cash, clothing etc. Sometimes that local flexibility would prove useful and I wonder if

the level of prescription we now have is necessary or even advisable.

JB: Are prisons places where prisoners can change their lives? What role do you have in influencing that?

DE: Unquestionably prisoners can change their lives whilst in prison. We offer a range of opportunities for that. I won't list them or describe them here as there are many better qualified than me to do so, but one aspect of change that is often overlooked is the responsibility of the individual to decide to make that change. That is an inward or personal process — the light bulb moment, if you like. We can help or nudge the prisoner on, but ultimately it has to be his decision. And until they reach that moment, there is only a limited amount we can do, though we can encourage.

And that leads me on to the other overlooked aspect of changing prisoners' lives — the role of the officer on the landing and the position of enormous influence he or she is in. I have seen many excellent officers during my career and their work in slowly chipping away the resistance, encouraging prisoners to behave more properly, and in setting a good example as role models is the most effective but (thankfully) not yet formally measured tool we have in the box.

JB: Has the role of financial and performance management changed in your day to day role?

DE: Not really for me. I never did pore endlessly over performance information. That's not to say it's not important: it is, provided it is contextualised and used with other sources of information — such as what you see yourself, and what staff, managers and prisoners tell you. I make sure I have trusted people around me who excel at this sort of work and I get as involved as I think I need to.

JB: How do you get people to do what you want? What is the right kind of relationship between staff and managers? Is this reflected in how you manage your staff and how your managers manage you?

DE: For me it's about enthusing staff and managers around an agenda and some outcomes and then giving them scope to create and innovate within that space. As managers we should really be concentrating more on outcomes, but the trouble is, every time something goes wrong we insist on a new procedure. I sometimes wonder how many procedures some of our staff have to remember, and I think we can become too reliant on

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procedures as some sort of safety blanket for managers — once the procedure is in we feel protected. Management presence and support, and using the talents of those around us are just as important.

JB: Do you have relationships with other organisations and the local community? What is the significance of these relationships? How do you approach them?

DE: Yes, we try to foster such relationships, because outside organisations can bring a richness to the otherwise closed world of the prison in terms of additional activity. They also bring with them a challenge to how we operate, and we should be open to such external perspectives and scrutiny and use them to improve our organisation.

JB: How have prisons changed during your working life?

DE: Undoubtedly they have improved. We now have an organisation that is much more committed to concepts such as decency and personal change. When I joined there were many good people around doing great things and setting high standards but the organisational commitment didn't seem to be there. What concerns me at the moment is that we are giving staff the right message that every contact with every prisoner really matters but they are probably struggling to make sense of this commitment as they see reducing numbers of staff around them. We need to help our staff to understand that financial constraints do not mean our commitment to what we believe in has lessened.

JB: Can you say something about the relationship between your world at establishment level and what is going on above you? Do you feel 'in tune' with the direction the Prison Service is taking? Do you feel you belong to an organisation you are proud to be part of, or that you are comfortable with how the organisation is modernising?

DE: I have to be honest and say I do feel a bit of a disconnect. The language from Headquarters is highly technocratic and organisational whereas I prefer to deal in plain English! It is also perhaps unfortunate that the organisation is simply having to go in certain directions as a result of the public finances whereas it would probably prefer to be concentrating more on other agendas. But throughout this I don't doubt the commitment of our leadership to fundamentally good values and I have every respect for the tough path they are having to follow.

But if there is one thing I'd ask, it's that we have a little less of the 'one size fits all' approach to problem solving across the Service, and a little more focus on tackling problems down the management line.

JB: What significance do issues of race and gender have in your working life?

DE: We all have duties under the Equalities Act and in respect of race, we have to ask ourselves why certain ethnic minorities are so disproportionately represented in the prison system and why they feel less well treated. This requires an ongoing commitment to dialogue with these groups.

JB: Are you aware of or engaged with the wider social context of imprisonment, such as links with social exclusion and inequality?

DE: I don't think you can do this job properly and not be aware. Our resettlement pathways are quite rightly linked to the factors that contribute to social exclusion. But for me the biggest factor in offending is parenting. How to raise standards of parenting is one of the biggest challenges facing us as a society.

JB: How do you view political and media discourse about imprisonment?

DE: I sometimes wonder whether the highly charged political nature of the debate in our country about crime and imprisonment is a good or bad thing. On the one hand it means

many clearly operational matters are unfortunately not left to those who know best simply to get on with it within the broad confines of government policy; on the other it means our political system is about as accountable as any system in the world. But I do find it frustrating that as an organisation we frequently don't seem to have a voice and public profile on the issues that matter when I think the public could reasonably expect a view from it. It is also frustrating that Governors are not able to comment more freely about criminal justice policy. I often reflect that it would be perfectly reasonable for citizens in a locality to want to know the views of their local Prison Governor about criminal justice policy and what works best. They will, after all, regard us as experts and we do, after all, have some expertise. And who knows, it might even enhance the debate!

JB: What are the achievements that you feel best reflect your approach to managing prisons? Can you describe your work at its best?

DE: I look back with particular pride on my time as Governor of Morton Hall and then The Mount. Both of those prisons had deep-rooted challenges: in the first

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how to care for a vulnerable female foreign national population and develop a diverse, tolerant and caring environment; in the second how to reduce out of control drug supply and improve safety in a young, macho, street-wise jail full of offenders from the London estates. Both required a huge organisational push and commitment over a sustained period of time, and both required marshalling the talents of many managers and staff. But in both cases we did it and

received external acknowledgement and recognition of those successes. The point here is that good governing doesn't involve going for the quick, easy wins in performance terms: it involves working out what the biggest challenge is that your prison faces, whatever that is, and then motivating and enthusing your staff towards it. And if you do that, most of the time the performance rewards will follow, and will mean a lot more when they do.



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