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# Interview: Øyvind Alnæs, Governor of Oslo Prison

*Øyvind Alnæs is the governor of Oslo Prison and was formerly the governor of Bastøy prison, both in Norway. He is interviewed by Dr Thomas Ugelvik, associate professor at the University of Tromsø.*

**Thomas Ugelvik, associate professor at the University of Tromsø, Norway, interviews Øyvind Alnæs. Alnæs is the governor of Oslo Prison, Norway's largest prison centrally located in the country's capital. He is formerly the governor of Bastøy prison, the world's first human-ecological prison.**

Oslo prison opened in 1851. The prison was originally placed on the hills overlooking the city. Today, Oslo has expanded to include the prison, which is now located in a multi-ethnic residential area close to the city centre. The high security all men's prison employs around 400 full-time staff (uniformed and non-uniformed staff combined) and has a capacity of 420 prisoners, or about 11 per cent of the total national prison population. It predominantly holds remand prisoners awaiting trial, but one can at any time also find a small number of prisoners serving shorter sentences in Oslo prison.

**TU: Can you describe your background before you joined the prison service?**

**OA:** That can be done very quickly, since I started working in the prison service at 21. I was the youngest student in my year at the Correctional Services Staff Academy. I actually decided very early in my life that I wanted to study criminology. I was interested in crime as a social phenomenon, I wanted to understand why some people turn to crime and why some people are marginalized and excluded from society. So I wanted to study criminology. But then I became a father quite young, so I needed money. And in Norway, the two-year prison officer training is a paid education. So I applied and was accepted, and then I decided to attend university courses in criminology as well on the side that first year. I have worked in the prison service ever since. I have continued my part-time education as well though; I combined criminology, psychology and public law courses in my undergraduate degree and then completed a masters degree in sociology of law at the University of Oslo in 2005. I have always wanted to do the job well, to be able to make a difference, and that has motivated me to continue to search for more knowledge, more insight, new perspectives.

**TU: What led you to prison work?**

**OA:** I had an interest and an engagement in these issues from early on. I come from a very typical working

class background, so I wanted to do something for the people that are excluded, and I wanted to understand what we as a society can do for these people. I also had a teacher at school that meant a lot to me. I think I can remember every single thing that he tried to teach me. He was a Maoist, and although he tried to be a very proper and professional teacher, he also thought me that you should always try to see things from different sides. You should never just accept the common sense ideas as given; you should always try to see things from several perspectives. He taught me that. So when I later met Nils Christie, I was fascinated, because was like that too, he was always looking at things from a different angle than anybody else.

**TU: Can you briefly describe your career to date?**

**OA:** I finished my prison officer education in 1985. My first job was at Ila, a prison for prisoners with long indeterminate sentences at the time, just the most serious cases, really. In 1986, I got the opportunity to be part of the so-called Ila project. The goal was to find a new way to approach the 'most difficult' violent offenders and sex offenders; the dangerous and deviant. Ila had a few prisoners who were difficult to keep on a normal prison wing, and we were asked to come up with something new. That project ended in tragedy when a prisoner — one of my contact prisoners — murdered one of my colleagues in 1989. After that, I spent a couple of weeks trying to decide whether this job was something I wanted to do. I needed to figure out if I really wanted to work with these people, these horrible people who were killing my colleagues. And I decided that yes, I am going to do this, and I am going to make a difference. I left Ila to take over Bastøy in 2000. At Bastøy, we created the world's first human-ecological prison, which opened in 2007. We wanted to create a prison that could actually teach prisoners to live like ordinary people. And then I came here in 2008.

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

**OA:** Yes, I think it is different. Some people might not agree, but I think my role as prison governor is to inspire people in the difficult and important work that they're doing. I need to talk to people, to be close to my staff. I like to motivate people, use the big words, show

them that I am enthusiastic and see the enthusiasm spread. And I think I'm fairly good at it. I wasn't 30 years ago, but I have gotten better. My job is to inspire people. It can be hard, working in a prison. Prison officers have to say no all the time. As human beings, we're not made to say no, we would like to say yes, to be positive. But officers have to say no a lot of the time. That's why I have to inspire them, why it's so important. To be able to do that, I have to really know what I'm doing. I need to be able to guide my staff and show them that I know the trade. There was a time when people used to say that you just need to know management, and you can manage any kind of organisation. I don't think that's true. You need to know something about the kind of people we have here, know their needs and what we can do to help them with their needs.

When it comes to the prisoners, my job is to make rehabilitation easier, that's my most important task. Some people think that Norwegian prisons are like hotels. They aren't. Those people don't know what they're talking about. Being a prisoner in Oslo prison is rough. It is a sad and bleak existence. My job is to offer activities, education and work to make that life a little bit better and at the same time make it possible for prisoners to learn something and, if possible, grow as human beings.

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

**OA:** The purpose of imprisonment is rehabilitation. In Norway, that's stated plainly in the laws, regulations and policy documents. Punishment by itself doesn't do any good to anyone. Punishment by itself just makes things worse. If your kid hits the kid next door, and you hit him, he learns nothing. You accomplish nothing. Perhaps he won't hit anyone while you're watching, because he's scared, but that's it. History has told us time and time again that pure punishment is destructive. For punishment to have an effect, you need to fill it with something constructive. We have been looking for 'what works' and we're still looking. I think we need to stop looking. We know that the people in prison come here with a rucksack full of problems. They have health related problems, substance abuse problems, work and education problems, housing problems. If we can help them solve some of these problems while they're in prison, we have done our job. People aren't born criminals. As human beings, the experiences we have and the people we meet in life shape us into who we are.

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**TU: What are the most important risks you manage?**

**OA:** I'm responsible for everything. This is a prison in the very centre of Oslo. I'm responsible for making sure that our prisoners don't escape. I'm also responsible for our staff. Their security is my responsibility. But if they treat prisoners badly, that's also my responsibility. When people are treated like people, they behave like people. Respect begets respect. I believe that when people are treated decently, they behave well. The pressure of the prison existence is much easier to handle if staff treat you respectfully.

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

**OA:** I have a lot of power to shape my team and the people working for me. But people cannot be shaped against their will. If you are working with people, you have to work systematically and patiently. And I have the power to do that. As long as I stay within my budget and work according to the prison service core values and the relevant laws and regulations, I am free to do a lot.

**TU: 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?**

**OA:** Unfortunately, there is less interaction than there used to be. I would like there to be more, I feel comfortable with the people who live here. There are some people here that I have known for 15 or 20 years. I would like to talk with prisoners on the wings regularly, take the time to listen to their thoughts and ideas and frustrations or whatever. My goal is to spend a whole day every week doing that, but I don't always have the time. The decisions I make impact them in all kinds of ways. I have a lot of power over the everyday life in here. In principle I decide whether to parole someone or not. That's my decision. So I have tremendous power over people's lives. That's why I have to meet them and talk with them, keep my finger on the pulse so to speak.

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

**OA:** Yes they are. People can change their lives in here. Together with my staff, I can create a life where prisoners are able to receive and make use of new knowledge and skills, new impulses. A life where change

is possible. A recent example is our new beehives. To me, it's important to think about the environment. We should all do what we can. Right now, bees are dying all over the world and I thought that we should try to do something here, locally, if we could. Therefore, I went together with a group of prisoners and staff on a course in beekeeping and we bought five beehives. That's a good example. As a prison governor, you have to create opportunities for prisoners to show that they are able to take responsibility for something. We need to give them meaningful activities. A lot of the time, the work that we're offering them in the prison system is meaningless and worthless. We're not paying them for it, so it's slave labour, basically. I think prisoners should get minimum wage. Of course they would be taxed, and they would pay for room and board. That would teach them responsibility and give them a sense of pride and personal worth.

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

**OA:** The budget situation is monitored more closely today. I'm spending more time on those things than I used to. And I have to report up the chain on more items now. I have to report all kinds of information to the Correctional Services Directorate three times per year. Things like escapes, positive urine samples, any drugs seized, staff sick days, and not least our capacity. We're supposed to be at 94 per cent of our capacity at any time. We have been at 98 per cent on average over the last three years, though.

**TU: 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?**

**OA:** People are different, so you have to choose your strategy carefully. Some people can be talked around, others need me to give them an order at the end of the day. If we're solving a problem, I try to invite people to give their opinion on how to solve it. And if I'm not a 100 per cent certain that I know they way forward, I will listen to the various opinions. But if I have made up my mind, I have made up my mind. I think it is important to have a good working relationship with staff at all levels of the institution. I want them to know where to reach me and I want the distance from the wing officers to my office to be as short as possible. I want them to think that they can come to me when they need to. I feel that the shorter the distance, the easier it is for me to get the results that I want.

The clientele has also changed. There are more foreign citizens and more prisoners have a history of psychiatric problems.

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

**OA:** We cooperate closely with the Red Cross and with the Salvation Army. And of course with the state and municipal authorities and the various welfare state agencies that are responsible for the various parts of the prisoners' welfare, like the health and social services, the local municipal library service and so on. We also have a close cooperation with the probation services. These are all strong relationships with traditions that go back a long time.

**TU: How have prisons changed during your working life?**

**OA:** The number of staff has changed. Following the Ila tragedy in 1989, the staff levels doubled many places. More recently, our budgets have been a bit tighter over the last five years. You can see it when it comes to the maintenance situation. Norwegian prisons are falling apart and we're not spending the money needed to fix them. The clientele has also changed. There are more foreign citizens and more prisoners have a history of psychiatric problems. When psychiatric hospitals and institutions close down, some people find their way to prison instead. The deinstitutionalisation process in the 1980s and 90s have had a strong impact on the prison system.

**TU: 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?**

**OA:** I am proud of the work we do in the prison estate. We do an important job, and we do it well a lot of the time. And I think my work is in line with the direction set out by my superiors. The current government has stated that we need to build high security prisons. I don't necessarily agree with that though. I think many prisoners in high security today could have served their sentence in lower security regimes. They are less expensive and the recidivism rate is lower.

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

**OA:** As for staff, we have more female wing managers than male here. All levels of staff combined,

we're at 40 per cent women. Sometimes you hear people say things like 'we're more women than men at work today' like it's a bad thing. I disagree; they have the same training, the same role. When it comes to prisoners, we have many foreign national prisoners from all over the world. On a given day, our population is around 60 per cent foreign national. But we're also the prison with the highest number of staff with different ethnic backgrounds. I have staff here with backgrounds from Pakistan, India, Tunisia, Somalia and so on. It's a great asset to me. It makes communicating with prisoners that much easier.

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

**OA:** Yes I am. Like I said, the links between crime and social exclusion and inequality were my primary motivation for applying to the Correctional Staff Academy in the first place.

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

**OA:** In the media, you get one of two things. Either prisons are almost like hotels, with fancy rooms

and flat-screen televisions, or they are depicted as horrible dungeons. There is nothing in between; it's either heaven or hell. If we want to talk about what it's actually like here, and what we actually do, the initiative has to be ours. Getting journalists to tell a story about the mundane, everyday normal life here can be difficult. We manage to get them interested sometimes though, like recently with the beehives. That story was exotic enough to catch their interest, and it gave us the opportunity to talk about the work that we do in a realistic way.

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

**OA:** I'm proud of what we accomplished at Bastøy. Oslo prison is a very different kind of prison. I'm also proud that we are now able to offer daytime activities to more people than ever before here. This is an old prison, and it's showing its age, but we managed to convince the powers that be that we needed a new activity wing. When it opened, it was the result of the work of many people. I was among the people that made it happen.