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Interview: Martin Narey

Martin Narey is a former Chief Executive of NOMS and recipient of the 2015 Perrie Award. He is interviewed by Paul Addicott, Head of Residence and Safety at HMP High Down.

After starting his working life in the NHS Martin Narey began his Prison Governor training in 1982. He worked at Lincoln Prison, Deerbolt Borstal and Frankland High Security Prison before moving to a succession of Whitehall posts. This period included work on delays in the Criminal Justice System and led to the introduction of the so called 'Narey Courts' which succeeded in significantly reducing court delays.

He returned to the Prison Service in 1996 as Head of Security Policy before joining the Prisons Board as Director of Resettlement in 1997. In 1998 he was appointed Director General of Prisons and became CEO of the National Offender Management Service following the merger of Prisons and Probation in 2003.

He resigned in 2005 to become Chief Executive of Barnardo's, leaving in 2011 after a successful 5 years. He is now a non-executive member of the Ministry of Justice Board.

Sir Martin was awarded a knighthood in the 2013 New Year's Honours list for services to vulnerable people. The theme of the Perrie Lectures 2015 was 'Older Prisoners' and Sir Martin Narey attended and was honoured with the Perrie Award.

PA: Older prisoners were the focus of the Perrie Lectures, what are your views on this increasing population?

MN: First of all I was struck by the extent of the problem since the ten years that I have been away, some things have been constant in the world of prisons and some things have changed. I was aware of the issues of older prisoners when I left in 2005, but it was something that was largely in the future at that time. It was not then a priority issue.

One of the things I considered while I listened to the presentations at Newbold however was whether, in recognition of the greater life expectancy of the UK population, the prison service has to look at the definitional terms *older prisoner*. There are about 10 million people in the UK over the age of 65 at the moment and in 20 years there will be 20 million. People are no longer old at the age of 50, or even 60 or 70 and the service might need to recognise this and think of defining older prisoners in a different way which takes account of health and disability.

PA: It is true that many people do not consider themselves as older or want help when we classify them as older, but it is important to support those who do need assistance. There were interesting

viewpoints this year at the lectures and examples of some good practice that are present within prisons. Can you think of anything more that we could be doing?

MN: To be honest it was an educating experience listening to the lectures this year, if I were to come back into this area again I would have to learn more, and I would have to go and visit some prisons to understand the issues better. It would be arrogant of me to suggest where the Prison Service is getting it wrong when I'm not remotely up to date with developments.

PA: If we look more generally about your past within the service, you received a knighthood in 2013 for your services with vulnerable people. What would you consider to be your key personal achievements in this area?

MN: It was not just prisons that led to me receiving this; I suspect that the sponsor organisation for my knighthood was the Department of Education rather than the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. But I would like to think that the knighthood recognises some of the things I tried to do with offenders; along with the work I did at Barnardo's and most recently in the world of social work to combat child neglect. If there is one bit of symmetry within my career it is the way in which I see child neglect as being so significant to the nature of the prison population. There is a much greater likelihood that deeply neglected children will grow up to find themselves in custody.

To answer your specific question, I think my greatest achievement is nothing to do with prisons. When I worked with Barnardo's. I went to visit a support unit for families affected by AIDS which Barnardo's ran jointly with an AIDS charity in Manchester. I met a woman there called Sophie who was an asylum seeker. She and her son, who were both HIV positive, were about to be deported to Malawi where they would quickly die without access to retroviral drugs. I was shocked by this and I was particularly moved by this mother, who was not particularly concerned about herself, but was terrified by the reality that she would die first and her 8 year old son would then be left on his own. I looked into this and I identified 70 or so children, all whom were HIV positive and were to be deported to Malawi or other African countries. Although they were well in England and, in the case of the children with no reduction in their life expectancy, deportation meant that they would die quickly. I was able to get access to Tony Blair who was then still Prime Minister and, with the Prime Minister's help, stop that. As a consequence all those families, perhaps 200 people, who would all be dead, remain in the UK. I also know one

or two of the children have done rather well academically and will now be on their way to University. So that was certainly the most important single thing I've done in my working life.

PA: Can you go into more detail about how you achieved change as significant as this?

MN: If I look back, the day I was at Manchester was the day of the Labour Party Conference. I was due to speak at a New Statesmen event about child poverty. I was so affected by this visit and meeting Sophie, that I changed my speech, and I spoke about how the Government had lost their moral compass. The Editor of The New Statesman, who heard my speech, asked me to write about the issue for them. It caused a bit of a flurry in the Labour party and I got some sympathetic and supportive calls from individuals, such as Ed Balls, but I had a very disappointing response from the then Home Office. I was fortunate in all sorts of ways when I was a Director General in that I got to know Tony Blair quite well, he had an interest in penal policy, and he agreed to meet me. It took a while to persuade the Home Office which was, even after the Prime Minister's support, resistant. But eventually we got an agreement. I agreed that Barnardo's would not publicise the fact that the children and families were reprieved. So the story has never been told.

PA: This really puts your accomplishments into perspective, looking back at your time within NOMS, what is your most memorable time?

MN: Possibly when I was an assistant Governor in a dispersal prison. I loved that job, it was in the 80's and dispersal prisons were very challenging, we had a lot of Irish political prisoners and managed 120 prisoners on B wing. At that time junior governors had no management responsibilities and the job was confined to working closely with prisoners and trying to distinguish between those that were or were not dangerous. The most memorable period however would have to be when I was Director General of course. And there was a period, when Phil Wheatley and I were working together, and we thought we were close to changing things very significantly. We did deliver the first statistically significant reductions in reoffending and I think we would have done much more if we were not overtaken by overcrowding and other pressures.

When I became Director General there were only 4 prisons which delivered drug treatment programmes, and when I left there were only 4 prisons which didn't. I could only do that because I received massive amounts of money to pour into drug treatment as well as into education, and

we significantly increased (by 10 per cent) the proportion of prisoners going into jobs on release.

PA: What would you consider to be some of the greatest challenges currently faced by the service?

MN: I think there are two things: money and population. My greatest regret is that we did not complete the changes I discussed earlier. I did not get on terribly well with David Blunkett who was my second Secretary of State when I was DG. But I knew we needed to get some control on the once again soaring population. I wanted to give the Service some certainty about the number of people we locked up for a given budget and stop the ludicrous practice — that no other service ever has to face — with having to take everyone that is sent to them, no matter how overcrowded they might be. Unless we could get a handle on that I knew I could not deliver some of the things that I wanted to deliver in terms of rehabilitation. So I helped David to agree changes with the then Lord Chief Justice, Harry Woolf, and introduce a Bill into the House of Commons which would, in 2003, have capped the prison population at 80,000.

David Blunkett was then forced to resign over getting a visa for his nanny — despite having one of the highest approval ratings of any Secretary of State since the War — and his successor was not interested in capping the population. That is one of the prime reasons I resigned. If we had been

able to control numbers the Prison Service would be in a much better place now and we would not be struggling with numbers as high as 86,000. We have an insatiable appetite for imprisonment in the UK and we need to find a way to change that.

PA: Do you think there will be an appetite for this type of legislation moving forward?

MN: Douglas Hurd, Margaret Thatcher's Justice Secretary was able to say that prison was a good way of making bad people worse. But it is now very difficult for a Justice Secretary to say that. I don't think the Prison Service can flourish in the way I know it can, if we don't do something about the inevitable conflict between shrinking budgets and a rising population. You can get the Service to work more effectively and efficiently, but there will be a point when those improvements will be cancelled by the financial burden of accommodating more and more prisoners.

PA: Do you think we can do more with offenders who would usually attract shorter sentences rather than sentencing them to prison?

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MN: I've just looked afresh at sentencing statistics in part because of discussions I've had with the new Secretary of State. I was struck by the extent in which you could slow down or stop the rise in the prison population just by trimming sentence lengths; I think I am right in saying that about 70 per cent of the rise in prison population in recent years can be explained by longer sentences. I'm not suggesting it is something simple to reverse, but there is nothing to suggest a 15 year sentence is any more beneficial in terms of reducing offending than a 12 year sentence. And there's little difference in terms of retribution. So I think there are things that might be achieved with addressing sentence length inflation.

PA: Would you suggest part of this reform has already begun with the abolition of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP)?

MN: This was implemented after I left and I'm not sure it was well implemented. I think the concept of *'there are some people that are too dangerous to be released'* is a sound one, but the implementation of the legislation was poor and it affected many more prisoners than was originally intended. Certainly far more than I anticipated.

PA: You have made reference to talking to the new Secretary of State, and there has been a lot of media interest surrounding prisons lately, and the proposed reforms that will take place such as the increased emphasis on education and earned release, can you suggest what the future holds for prisons following your discussions?

MN: I was at Michael Gove's first prisons speech on Friday and I thought it was the most encouraging Ministerial speech I have heard on prisons since Jack Straws' maiden prison speech in 1998. I was thrilled to hear about the reemphasis on education and elated to hear the principle of prisoners earning their release. I must sound like a dinosaur, but as I explained to Michael Gove, my first job in the prison service after initial officer training was working in a borstal in the last year of borstals' existence. The autonomy given to prison governors under the borstal regime was quite remarkable. If we had a boy or a young man (we took 15-21 year olds in those days) he could serve a minimum of 6 months or a maximum of 2 years and the point at which he was released was determined entirely by the Governor and entirely on the basis on how the borstal trainee behaved and worked. So — this being a borstal in the North-east, if we had a young man who got himself a City and Guilds in building and made himself employable as a builder on release to Sunderland, he might be released after 26 weeks.

Someone who didn't, and missed out on the opportunities, could stay in borstal for up to 2 years. What destroyed borstals, what led to their abolition, was, inevitably, overcrowding. Borstals were routinely directed to release all their offenders on or near the 26 week mark to make spaces and the philosophy of the regime was destroyed. But I think there are two things to learn from that history: first that the principle of earned release is a good one, and secondly that we might think once again about gubernatorial autonomy. While spending quite a bit of my time in the Department of Education in the last few years, I've watched with some interest as autonomy has been restored to head teachers. I know Michael Gove wants to see whether there's a similar restoration of autonomy from which prison governors might benefit.

PA: It will be interesting to see how this will come to fruition within the current climate with the numbers we have, and all the outsourcing and partnership working within establishments. As with the borstals, if we were to offer an incentive, to maintain legitimacy we would need to be able to honour that.

MN: I am not suggesting any of this is easy, and I don't think Michael Gove thinks any of this is easy. He is spending a lot of time visiting places, and I have taken him on one visit to a prison already. He has clearly got an immediately good relationship with Michael Spurr. I told Michael Gove on the day he

was appointed that Michael was a fine man and an excellent person to lead the service.

PA: Looking at some of your accolades within the Prison Service including: changing the number one priority in the Prison Service from preventing escapes to preventing deaths; setting up safer custody and reception peer orderlies to help reduce the risk and famously stating: *'a death is worse than an escape'* and that *'it was shameful that we were more concerned about an escape rather than a death.'* With that in mind, what are your views of the current statistics surrounding self harm and suicide within prisons?

MN: Well first of all, before accepting any plaudits, I should volunteer that, I think, the peak number of self inflicted deaths in custody happened on my watch, not on Phil Wheatley's and not on Michael Spurr's. But it's right that reducing deaths was a very real priority for me and why I wanted the same concentration on reducing deaths as my predecessor had on reducing escapes. I thought that our concentration on escapes, important as it was, meant that

we were not addressing other things. I remember during my first speech as Director General in 1998 I talked about suicide, as I thought we were in danger of, perhaps not being dismissive about it, but accepting that a large number of self inflicted deaths were simply inevitable.

I understood the reasons for that, the morbidity of the population had become more acute as more and more people with mental disorders were being admitted. I know that the time I was DG a fifth of all males and two-fifths of all females who came into prison had previously tried to take their own lives. Nevertheless, I felt we were in the position where there was a belief that we just could not do anything about those deaths. We could and we did. But again, that was in large part because I got access to new money and in a magnitude of which Michael Spurr could only dream. I went personally to the Treasury and talked to the lead officials in charge of public spending about suicides, I obtained the investment for what became known as the Safer Cells Programme. But, it was a long time before the tide was turned and the numbers of deaths began to drop.

PA: Thank you for all your interesting views. Obviously you have a long list of achievements, and you have been recognised with a Knighthood and now the Perrie Award, how does it feel?

MN: I was enormously touched by the Perrie Award. For ten years I've avoided involving myself in prison issues in the same way as I don't get drawn into issues about Barnardo's. That may change now, and I suspect I will be doing some part time work advising Michael Gove.

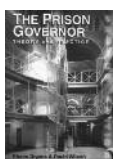
So against that, ten years after I have left the service, to be told the Perrie Lectures wanted to give me an award, was very touching. The gift I was given is hanging on my study wall, and I love it.

I never wanted to leave. I did not want to resign. But, at the time, I felt I had come to the end of the road, I had helped to devise a thing called NOMS, but the NOMS I had helped to devise required, three things: It required a cap on the prison population which I have talked about; it required greater competition in delivering both prison and probation services, and it required a transfer of authority from prison staff to probation staff in the managing offenders. Charles Clarke was never committed to those reforms he inherited from David Blunkett, was dismissive of population control and unwilling to take on the trades unions on competition. I knew it was time for me to go. But there has never been a week in the ten years that I have not missed prisons and offenders.



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