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Empowerment, innovation and prison reform

Interview with Pamela Dow

Pamela Dow is former Director of Strategy at the Ministry of Justice. She is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Pamela Dow started her career as a lobbyist working on a range of social policies. She joined the civil service in 2010 and became Principal Private Secretary to Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education. This period saw an ambitious programme of reforms¹ including the expansion of the academy model, where schools opted-out of local government control and instead became independent, funded directly from the Department for Education, or part of multi-academy trusts. There were also reforms intended to enhance the status of teaching, improve behaviour in schools, and enhance accountability by publishing data on school performance and strengthening OFSTED's independent inspection. Following a period at Tech City UK she became Director of Strategy in the Ministry of Justice in 2015, again supporting Michael Gove's reform programme as Secretary of State for Justice. The changes included a renewed focus on rehabilitation, particularly concentrating on the potential benefits of education and training for employment,² to be tested in six 'early adopter' reform prisons operating with greater autonomy over finance, human resources and regime delivery.³ Funding was also secured for estate improvements overall, including replacing some Victorian prisons with purpose built establishments. These proposals formed the core of the Government's White Paper on prisons published in 2016.⁴

She has recently taken up a new post as Chief Reform Officer with Catch 22,⁵ which describes itself as 'a social business—a not for profit business with a social mission'. It was set up originally in 1788 as The Royal Philanthropic Society and subsequently

expanded its work, merging with other charitable organisations until it became Catch 22 in 2008. They work with people entangled in the social welfare cycle, aiming to create 'a strong society where everybody has a good place to live, a purpose and good people around them'. They deliver services with young people and families, in the criminal justice system, and in education, training, employment and apprenticeships.

This interview took place in June 2017.

JB: Could you describe your background and professional history?

PD: I grew up in the East Riding of Yorkshire, in a very happy and stable family, and went to the local comprehensive. It wasn't a brilliant school but okay, and I was lucky that my Glaswegian working class parents put such an emphasis on reading. I was also lucky to get into Oxford University, and lucky to have chosen Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) because I had thought the subjects sounded interesting. I discovered its reputation (good and bad) later!

I started my career as a lobbyist in the private sector, leading advocacy campaigns to influence policymakers at all levels and in a range of sectors. I did this for a children's charity for a while, during an important time for policy in response to the Victoria Climbié and Soham murders. It was a very different time: huge Government majority and very well-funded voluntary sector—a lot of statutory funding, the opposite of austerity. Looking back critically I am not convinced that this was good for the quality of policy or services. Parliamentary scrutiny was weak and there was a lot of complacency and groupthink in Whitehall and beyond.

1. See Department for Education (2010) *The importance of teaching: the schools White Paper 2010* London: The Stationary Office available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175429/CM-7980.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.
2. See Coates, S. (2016) *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prison* London: Ministry of Justice available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.
3. See Gove, M. (2015) *The treasure in the heart of man—making prisons work* available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-treasure-in-the-heart-of-man-making-prisons-work> accessed on 28 June 2017.
4. Ministry of Justice (2016) *Prison safety and reform* London: Ministry of Justice available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.
5. See <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/>

I saw a civil service job advertised in 2007 and applied because it was the last bit of the policy-making jigsaw I hadn't seen first-hand. It was a new role in the education department which was embracing 'nudge theory', and had what now seem like ludicrously large budgets to spend on social marketing campaigns.

I was fascinated by the machinery of Whitehall and how it works, which drew me to Ministerial Private Offices—the engine rooms within the Ship of State. I became Principal Private Secretary to Michael Gove as Education Secretary and remained in that role through very challenging but rewarding times, 2011–2014.

After a secondment into Tech City UK, to better understand digital technology policy, I returned to Whitehall as Director of Strategy at the Ministry of Justice in 2015, to support the ambitious prison and probation reform programme Michael Gove had introduced that summer. Even if he hadn't left Government the following year, I think I would have been making the case to him that this new agenda had to happen from the ground up, and that the 'Early Adopter' reform prisons needed more direct and practical support to manage what they wanted to do and how. Over the last year I worked closely with Ian Bickers at HMP Wandsworth, and many other committed reformers, and helped the RSA proposals for a 'New Futures Network', to help prison leaders build broad and deep local partnerships, with employers and charities, for example.⁶

I feel very privileged to be joining Chris Wright's team at Catch 22 as I have admired him and the organisation for a long time. Their mantra for public service reform makes sense to me ideologically but also based on my experience of central policymaking and delivery. People need something fulfilling to do, somewhere to live, and people to love, and if they haven't been lucky enough to build that life for themselves we can help them through services that are local, human, and unlock capacity in the public, private and voluntary sector.

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Rarely a day passes that I don't see some data or hear a personal story that reminds me how much I owe to a happy, stable family, and reading lots of books.

JB: You worked in the Department for Education at a senior level, what do you consider to be the most important and successful changes in the management of schools and quality of education in recent years?

PD: I would highlight four main aspects. First, devolving leadership and management to the frontline, in particular through the expansion of academies and the introduction of free schools. Second, an improvement in status and quality of teaching through programmes such as 'Future Leaders' (a leadership development programme for senior leaders preparing to become headteachers in challenging contexts), 'Teach First' (a two-year programme bringing high quality graduates into teaching) and 'Now Teach' (a programme bringing people into teaching as a second career). More teachers than ever have firsts and 2:1 degrees. Third, better quality and availability of research and evidence, but also a democratisation of access to this. It is now expected that people at all levels in education look outwards and internationally, scrutinise innovation and understand what is working and why. Finally, there are now higher expectations and

aspirations overall. The bar was raised for behaviour, academic rigour, pupil destinations etc. Removing the Ofsted 'satisfactory' rating and replacing it with a marking of 'requires improvement', exposed schools that had been inadequate for decades, and supported them to get better.

JB: What evidence is there that this has made a difference?

PD: The most important outcome is that the independent inspection body, OFSTED, report 1.4 million more children attending schools rated as 'outstanding' or 'good' than in 2010.⁷ Other systemic changes have built a culture of learning. The introduction of the English

6. See <https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/public-services-and-communities-folder/new-futures-networks>.

7. OFSTED (2015) *The annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2014/15* London: The Stationary Office available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/483347/Ofsted_annual_report_education_and_skills.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.

Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure has led to more kids doing core subjects for longer.⁸ The 'Progress 8' performance measure is a sophisticated comparative tool encouraging a broad and deep curriculum.⁹ The 'What Works' movement continues to expand and has embedded empiricism into the teaching profession, for example through 'ResearchED'.¹⁰

JB: Those changes have not been universally welcomed, what do you consider to be the main criticisms and how would you respond to them?

PD: As you can imagine I have reflected on the 2010–14 period in education reform at length, having been so close to the architects and generals, and because it has attracted so much commentary. Sometimes it feels like no book or article can be written about the Coalition government without depicting Michael Gove and his team as either the heroic crusaders saving pupils from the soft bigotry of low expectations, or the evil marauders destroying all that teachers hold sacred, depending on the author's ideological bent. It sometimes feels impossible to have objective conversations about that period with people who really know and care about education, because they have such a strong belief in Gove as either hero or villain.

I think that goes to the root of the problem. The criticism, which in some places had reached hysterical proportion by 2014, was in many cases directed at myths, or wilful misunderstanding. For example, the exaggeration around non-qualified staff. Qualified Teaching Status wasn't being removed. It was being made possible for state schools to do what private schools had always been able to do, *if* they wanted to: employ a former Olympic athlete or opera singer to coach sport or teach music, and train them on the job. There were many media myths about free schools. It just wasn't true that middle class parents were being allowed to open schools for their own kids.

We at the Department for Education should have done *much* more to correct inaccuracies and respond with compelling arguments and evidence. Rather than accept an adversarial, binary, politicised, public debate (The Blob¹¹ vs E.D. Hirsch,¹² facts vs skills, traditional vs progressive, Indian Dance vs Calculus), the role of the civil service should have been to promote and defend the reform agenda with neutral explanation and information. I think officials misinterpret 'neutrality'—we serve the elected government and it is absolutely our job to do this, particularly in response to 'fake news'. For example, it wasn't true that free schools weren't providing additional places in areas of need, they were and they do. It wasn't true that Michael Gove 'banned' *To Kill a Mockingbird*, just complete rubbish. It wasn't true that music, art and drama were being undermined by curriculum changes. And so on.

JB: When you moved into criminal justice policy and reform, how much did those education reforms shape your thinking?

PD: The common themes of successful public service reform influenced me very much, especially the mutually reinforcing fourfold approach: devolved leadership, workforce quality, accountability through transparency and increased ambition. These seem to be evident wherever you see better outcomes, in education, health, and policing in the UK and beyond. Frontline institutions are given more power and flexibility, there is more investment in those people to help them lead and manage well, not just pay but taking recruitment, retention and ongoing development seriously. Performance data is published, ideally automated, to encourage sophisticated comparison and a healthy competitive system. People ask *why* things are happening, not just *what* is happening. This allows expectations to be based on the achievement of the best, and initiative and ambition to be valued and rewarded.

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8. The English Baccalaureate is a performance measure showing how many pupils achieve grade C or above in core academic subjects in any government funded school. The core subjects are English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language. For further information see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc> accessed on 29 June 2017.

9. Progress 8 is a measure that aims to capture the progress a pupil makes between the end of primary school and the end of secondary school. The outcomes can be compared with the achievements of other pupils with the same starting point. For more information see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/progress-8-school-performance-measure> accessed on 29 June 2017.

10. See <http://www.workingoutwhatworks.com/> accessed on 29 June 2017.

11. Michael Gove used the term 'The Blob' to refer to a perceived educational establishment who promoted liberal progressive education based upon skills rather than knowledge. See www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146 accessed on 29 June 2017.

12. E.D. Hirsch is an American educationalist who promoted the notion of knowledge based learning and the acquisition of 'cultural literacy'. See Hirsch, E. (1987) *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

I owe a lot to Sir Michael Barber's work, especially *Unleashing greatness*,¹³ which I turn to often—replace 'education' and 'schools' with 'justice' and 'prisons', and it is equally compelling.

JB: One of the most prominent changes have been the discussion around a movement away from tightly controlled central prescription towards more local autonomy or empowerment. What do you see as the potential benefits of this approach?

PD: I think one of the most corrosive trends in bureaucratic management has been towards ever greater central codification and rigid hierarchies. It's not just Whitehall, it is rife in all sectors, but coupled with the inherent risk-aversion and complexity of modern government, it is particularly damaging in public service delivery. Reading about the horrific Grenfell Tower fire it seems clear to me that we will probably never find out whether or not one person, in one meeting, made a critical decision about cladding or sprinklers or evacuation policy.

The sheer number of different boards and bodies and suppliers and commissioners involved absolves everyone from direct culpability. In prisons and probation we should be applying a Grenfell Tower lesson to all our processes, counting the governance layers between the nominally accountable board and the ultimate output. Is everyone confident that the right thing is being done? People make good decisions when they know that their actions are transparent and have a direct impact on themselves or others. They take the time to find out the information they need, and they are honest about their abilities and experience, when they know the implications are real. I think across the criminal justice system we have had a proliferation of agencies at the expense of personal agency.

There's a brilliant line in TS Eliot's *Choruses from The Rock*: 'dreaming of systems so perfect no-one will need to be good'. That's what central prescription leads to. Whereas what we need are systems good enough that no one needs to be perfect, because no one is. But also that we need people to be good, at all levels—not look upwards for constant direction and prescription but to do the right thing, to be moral, to seek improvement, raise standards, build broad and deep local networks.

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Not only will this make outcomes better, ultimately I believe reduce offending but it will make working life better for everyone, officers to Directors. Less miserably compliant and bureaucratic, fewer meaningless meetings, less paperwork.

JB: The prison system is a more inter-dependent and integrated system than schools because of, for example, the level of prisoner transfers. Does this change how that balance between central control and local discretion is structured?

PD: Clearly it must, and policy on population management or how to manage the high security estate, for example, must be made by operational experts, not people like me! It is obviously sensible to think about particular categories of offenders at a national level, like sex offenders or under 18s for example, where the numbers involved and therapeutic interventions needed require a single, strategic, approach.

That being said, I think if we said to a headteacher in Newham that they had it easier because they could predict demand, we would get a hollow laugh in response. I would argue that the very interdependence and size of population makes local discretion and regional networks even more necessary. Who is better equipped to understand how transport affects family visits, or gang rivalries between Doncaster and Sheffield, than the officers and Governors on the ground?

JB: There is also a cultural change that is necessary to make this work. For many years prison governors have had to work with tightly defined centrally directed targets or change management plans and now they are being asked to work creatively and independently. How can that kind of change be realised within that professional history and culture?

PD: It's going to take a generation, at least, and consistency of leadership. Culture change is the most nebulous and difficult thing to achieve, and requires quite a lot of serendipity and luck, as well as a shared vision and courage to try new things. Sharing examples of creativity and independence will be vital, and valuing the people who are doing it already. Some of the most radical reformers have been quietly getting on with being great on the landings and under the radar for decades—we need to show them we've got their back. Things like 'Unlocked', the programme for training

13. Available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_WP_GAC_Education_Unleashing_Greatness.pdf accessed on 29 June 2017.

graduate officers who will focus on education and rehabilitation, will also have a big impact—a new generation of enthusiastic reformers with a status and reach beyond the prison service and its walls.

I only partly buy the complaints about a constantly changing political landscape or Secretary of State. We need to be more confident in our expertise and advice. Every Minister I have ever worked with wants to make things better not worse, and responds well to an experienced public servant with mastery of their brief and innovative proposals.

JB: You worked for a time with one of the early adopter reform prisons, Wandsworth. What are your reflections upon the reform programme in practice?

PD: The whole team at Wandsworth were inspiring: completely up for it, courageous, committed and humane. Ian Bickers, the Executive Governor, was a charismatic leader who had the confidence of his staff and men, and he had recruited well around him. People like Sarah Fitzgerald, who was leading a truly radical overhaul of education and training. It was a tricky place to test an ambitious agenda. Wandsworth is overcrowded, has a very high remand and foreign national population, and very little outdoor space. That being said there was no shortage of ambition and achievement: a completely new recruitment model led by Ian and Human Resource Business Partner, Jo Greenlees, highlighted the sclerosis and costs of the centralised application process; the grant funded projects like LJ Flanders' 'Cell workout', 'Food matters' (partner delivered projects designed by staff and prisoners as part of the mental health strategy and rehabilitative culture) and the conservation work (landscaping outdoor areas as both a physical improvement measure and a training opportunity for prisoners) were all valuable in themselves but symbolic in demonstrating how much extra resource is there to be leveraged if you can build local partnerships. One thing that I found surprising and delightful was the sheer range and scale of local interest and support, from employers, colleges, sports clubs, charities, even residential neighbours. I know all prisons have different contexts but if we could just unlock (!) some of this capacity in a safe and helpful way, the results could be incredible.

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My overall reflection is that the timing was very difficult, and the leadership and change needed a lot more time to embed—the first year is when you most need clarity and consistency of vision, and that wasn't there from the Ministry of Justice or the Prison Service for a range of reasons we're all familiar with.

JB: Another aspect of the change programme is that alongside greater autonomy comes greater accountability. What does that mean, how would you envisage that accountability being exercised?

PD: As I have said above, the 'transparency' bit of the public service improvement quartet is what guarantees accountability.

I think prisons and probation services should publish everything they are measuring, in an accessible, comparative format—from Staff Quality of Life surveys and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life assessments to monthly data about how many cell observation panels were knocked out and what it cost. Community Rehabilitation Companies and National Probation Service statistics about jobs and housing should also be routinely available to all, obviously being responsible and ethical about individual identifiers. There are plenty of digital technology agencies who would be willing to help for a smaller cost or pro bono, just to be able to support ambitious policy. Imagine the potential for artificial intelligence and predictive analytics, freeing officers from the boring paper-based processes of reporting so they can focus on the aspects of the job only humans are capable of.

It won't be perfect at first, there will be outliers who look better or worse than they should for explicable reasons, but if you monitor how this transparency of data changes behaviour across the system you can start to see what leads to unwelcome 'gaming' and correct it, and what leads to very welcome 'nudging' and encourage it. Yes, 'league tables' will likely emerge and there will be the odd newspaper headline at first, but journalists soon move on and that's when academics, data scientists and yes, armchair enthusiasts, can compare 'like' institutions or areas, test theories, come up with insights. Governors and Deputies would be incentivised to look at things like where their data on assaults sits in comparison to a similar prison, and then visit the ones doing better with their officers, to explore why and how.

No system or process was ever made worse by shining a light on it, and I hate the implicit arrogance of Whitehall that citizens can't be trusted to understand the public services they pay for.

JB: How can data and technology be used in order to better understand prisons and improve quality? What are the limitations of this?

PD: As I mentioned above, technology and artificial intelligence should be used to do what it is best at, processing bulk, predictable and routine information, and human beings allowed to do what they are best at, namely empathy, judgement, non-routine assessment, directly supporting other human beings.

JB: The second aspect of the reform programme is improving the opportunities for prisoners to change their lives, so reducing reoffending? What is new or different in this regard? How can that aspiration be realised?

PD: I don't think this is necessarily new, we have known what reduces reoffending for nearly a century. There is a greater public acceptance of the need to rehabilitate prisoners at the moment, and deal with illiteracy or lack of skills, or health or addiction issues, which we should take advantage of—more employers are keen and willing to play more of a role, for example designing and delivering apprentices.

Politicians and senior officials need to have a thicker skin about inevitable criticism, both of the tabloid, 'prison shouldn't be soft or easy' variety, or the campaigners who obsess over the existence of private prisons. Critics will always be there, and we shouldn't allow people who have been arguing the same things for a hundred years with no impact to prevent a positive and pragmatic change programme.

JB: The current operating context is very challenging, with acknowledged problems around safety. Does the new model offer new opportunities to improve this situation?

PD: I think it does, because of the emphasis on investing in staff numbers and quality, and the

expectation that governors and their leadership teams can make decisions about the specific needs of their prison. The prison population is also just too large and anything governors can do to work more closely with local Criminal Justice Boards, Police and Crime Commissioners, the Crown Prosecution Service and judiciary, to divert people from prison, is vital. The new incentives for local innovation and looking outwards, such as devolved budgets and recognition through inspection, will aid this.

JB: How far is the wider social context, particularly around the links between imprisonment and inequality, recognised and responded to within this reform programme? For example, there are clear links between poverty and imprisonment, some minority groups particularly young Black men are disproportionately entangled in the criminal justice system, and international research shows that countries with greater economic inequality also have higher rates of imprisonment. How far are these wider issues of social justice addressed?

PD: It's a work in progress isn't it, and linked to everything I've said about a self-improving and intellectually curious system, with valued and experienced staff at all levels, and strong and deep local networks. David Lammy's Review¹⁴ on the treatment and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system, will be a great test of the new approach—how many governors will read it and share it with their staff, and maybe appoint one of their Deputies to be personally responsible for taking recommendations forward as they apply on the wing and beyond.

JB: What will be your continued role in prisons and what are your future aspirations?

PD: In moving to this new role at Catch 22 I hope to consolidate and build on everything I have done and seen in education and justice over the last decade. I am excited about devolution, and excited about the disappearance of silos in the public, private and voluntary sector.

14. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/lammy-review> accessed on 29 June 2017.