

Chris Grayling looking to reform prisons

Prison: What is it good for?

Opinion piece by Jane Turner

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The supremacy of imprisonment as a way of dealing with offenders has never been seriously challenged, even though there is plenty of evidence to show that it does not work, as either a form of punishment or a place of rehabilitation. But in the last few months, crime, punishment, and UK prisons have been in the news regularly. The Coalition government, has enormous and growing debts, and has been reviewing all public services to identify where they can make cuts, and as spending on prisons is high (£50,000 per year, per offender) they have been taking a closer look. Highlighting the glaringly high re-offending rate and the failure of prisons to rehabilitate and prevent re-offending.

Chris Grayling, the Justice Minister has announced a review and a number of new cost-cutting initiatives, describing the current arrangements as a bad return on investment. Ideas already mooted include compulsory work or education for offenders in order to earn their privileges, such as Sky TV a tightening of the existing regime. He has also announced a mentoring scheme, which relies on ex-offenders or other providers (reporting to the state) to support (police) newly released offenders for a period of 12 months, to prevent them re-offending. The mentoring idea includes practical support in finding work and housing, and has received some initial positive appraisal but is untested and likely to take eons. Both schemes are attempts to educate, influence and control offenders, to make them change their offending behaviour by offering incentives, and will not please the hang em and flog em brigade who insist that punishment is the answer. Rehabilitation or punishment? Two established methods for dealing with offenders, neither of which has had a significant impact on reducing crime. So, just how should we treat those who break society's laws?

The treatment of offenders has come a long way since the days of racks, ducking, guillotines, gallows, birching, flogging, hard labour, and transportation. Originally, prisons were simply places to hold people while awaiting a range of gruesome punishments, and then became a form of punishment themselves, depriving offenders of their liberty and protecting society from their menacing ways. Nelson Mandela, one of the world's most famous political offenders, spent almost 20 of his 27 years in jail, confined to a small cell, the floor was his bed, and he had a bucket for a toilet. He was forced to do hard labour in a quarry, received one letter every six months, and was allowed one 30-minute visit a year. The prison officials were as brutal as the conditions and it is a testament to the man and his will that he survived such an ordeal. Many Northern Irish political offenders were regularly and viciously beaten, and locked in shit smeared cells for years with maggot-infested mattresses to sleep on in the infamous Maze prison. Look back through the history books even further and the brutality and inhumanity shown to those who broke the laws of society are difficult for mollycoddled modern day citizens to contemplate. Yet, despite such horrific punishment, people still committed crime.

Reformers were successful in abolishing the death penalty, hard labour, cruel and punitive regimes and for changing the purpose of prisons. They established the idea that for most inmates, prisons should be places of reform and rehabilitation, where they could learn the skills to support themselves when released, and they introduced programmes of work and education. Modern day prisons incorporate a vast range of services from different providers, allowing participants to work and earn money, learn and get qualifications and get psychological

help for an increasing list of disorders. So, instead of bumps and bruises, offenders now leave institutions with work experience, a handful of qualifications, a boost to their self-esteem, and a wad of cash, but they still commit crime. The re-offending rate is high (around 30%), and the prisons are full of new and repeat offenders.

Crime is a broad and changeable concept, differing across time and place, but in essence, you commit a crime and get a criminal record if you break one of the laws of society, of which of course, there are many. People are imprisoned for playing music too loudly and disturbing their neighbours, claiming benefits fraudulently, stealing electricity by bypassing the meter and driving without due care and attention. Many have been drunk in a public place and some have driven a car without a licence or insurance, have not paid business VAT or income tax correctly, and shoplifted for themselves or others. Quite a few have been vandals, and some have stolen from their employer. Some have received stolen goods, left the scene of an accident, inflicted grievous bodily harm, burgled houses, and shops, and carried drugs into the country and then sold them to others. Some are illegal immigrants, caught working without the relevant documentation, and many are prostitutes of one description or another. A small number have murdered their own offspring, some have murdered their partners, and others have beaten or murdered strangers in random acts of extreme violence. Types and patterns of crime differ between men and women, and men commit the majority of crimes (approximately 80000 of the total prison population of 85000 is male). Offenders and their crimes are categorised and then offenders are housed in different institutions depending on that category.

Prison is not quite like the holiday camp one hears talk of, offenders are denied their freedom and contained within the walls of the institution. They have no choice about who they share a cell with, about what they eat and drink, and restricted choices relating to work and education. Yes, many of them have televisions and they can use the gym and get regular food and a warm if rather small hard bed. They also get to see their loved ones at pre-arranged visit times but may not be allowed to touch or kiss them. They can write and receive letters and make occasional phone calls under certain circumstances, but they still have to follow the prison regime. They get up when told, eat when told, wash and toilet when told, go to bed when told, do as they are told. The consequence of disobedience is the denial of some of their basic privileges, such as loss of TV, loss of association with other offenders, solitary confinement and being denied permission to attend work, education or exercise for a defined period of time. Offenders say the harshest punishment is the denial or restriction of visits from friends and family and the loss of their freedom.

In addition to attending classes in a range of subjects, many offenders work within the prison and get paid for it (a lot less than the minimum wage); amongst other jobs, they cook, garden, paint and decorate, wash and clean and when near to the end of their sentence, go out on day release to work with real employers. They have in-house bank accounts into which their prison earnings are paid, supplemented by money sent in, and can purchase goods from a limited range in the prison shop, including cigarettes, sweets and their own tea and coffee supplies. There is no uniform, and most of them wear their own clothes.

Many of them also attend a range of therapeutic and behavioural control courses, including anger management, alcohol and drugs awareness, and a range of counselling programmes. These courses are designed to get them to talk about their crimes, how they feel about themselves and about what they did, get them to see how and where they went wrong, boost their self-esteem, and persuade them to change their offending

behaviour by addressing their various behavioural problems, illnesses and addictions (reflecting a cultural trend in society). The overall message being that they are victims of abuse and/or society, are emotionally fragile, vulnerable and in need of help and support from a range of professionals. Some do have serious illnesses, which they need help with and medication for, but for most, social factors are at the root of their problems. Some, of course, play the game and attend some or all of the above to get their sentences reduced or early release with an electronic tag. A lot of offenders also receive regular medication for a whole host of addictions and ailments including heroin and cocaine substitutes. They have regular access to doctors, nurses, opticians, and dentists without the long wait and fees that those in the real world have to put up with and are taken in taxis to see specialists, albeit in handcuffs.

Marx said, Question everything, and I do. I question the role of prisons as either places of punishment or places of rehabilitation; they are as messed up as many public institutions, as inefficient and a massive waste of public money. I question the madness, efficiency, and futility of these enormous estates that house thousands of people (currently around 85000) at vast expense for so long with little to show for it. It is difficult to work out what purpose a modern day prison really serves.

Do prisons punish people? The answer is complex, and yes and no. Each offender is unique and each crime committed in specific circumstances, and for a minority, the loss of freedom is sufficient punishment in itself and a dis-incentive to re-offend. For them, prison really is a living hell (even with the TV on). But for others? Well, you only have to look at the re-offending rate, to work out that for most offenders, doing time is just something they are accustomed to, something they have to get through, and in a place where conditions are not so uncomfortable. Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother said he wasn't a man until he had been to prison. As pointed out by

[Luke Gittos](http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/13623/ "Luke Gittos on Prison Reform"), writing for Spiked ([What's so liberal about rehabilitation?](http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/13623/ "What's so liberal about rehabilitation?")), Britain is the only country in

the world where offenders are automatically released half way through their sentence, and where whole life sentences are extremely rare. Retributive punishment is a thing of the past.

Do prisons rehabilitate people? Again, yes and no. Some embrace the rehabilitation process, fill their long days and nights with work and study and leave with their first ever experience of regular work and some qualifications. But, there are many more who when inside, get up for work each day, attend classes, behave like model citizens and leave the institution, in better health and better equipped to deal with life (rehabilitated), only to return again several months, weeks or even days later.

What does rehabilitation actually mean? The word itself has become associated with offenders, or with those who consume too many drugs or too much alcohol, and even with celebrities taking respite in clinics from their hedonistic and destructive lifestyles. Amy Winehouse famously said No, No, No, but offenders get little choice in the matter, they have to follow rules, and be seen to make lifestyle changes in order to gain privileges. They are effectively coerced which goes against the spirit of true rehabilitation which means restoration and requires autonomy not compulsion, so as soon as they are released, many ex-offenders return to their old

The fact that so many offenders go back to prison time and time again, is perhaps the best measure of the effectiveness of prisons, and one on which they fail. If rehabilitation were successful, then offenders would be ex-offenders, getting on with life in the

real world and not back in the dock. If the punishment had been suitable and sufficiently daunting, they wouldn't be back in jail for more of the same and taking regular stretches there, like most of us take weekend breaks.

It is hardly surprising that society is confused about how to treat offenders, when we look at the ruling elite, who bereft of a philosophy and any forward looking ideas, continue to take us all backwards. When there is confusion about the direction of society and uncertainty of purpose, the approach to the treatment of offenders is just as muddled. Not long ago Parliament was even discussing giving offenders the right to vote! And, an article in a recent edition of The Socialist Worker said that restricting TV access to offenders is an attack on vulnerable people!

When almost everyone is seen as some sort of victim and in need of some sort of therapy, it is not surprising that lawbreakers are seen as victims too, with a long list of disorders and entitlements requiring constant and continuous state intervention.

Despite our obsession with crime and offenders - the TV schedules are full of programmes about crime, both fictional and real - there has not been a serious discussion about how to deal with real world offenders. There is always a book on crime in the top ten lists of best-sellers, and from the news you would think that the earth is over-run with offenders and terrorists, and yet, no serious paper on real life crime. So, a serious discussion about how society deals with crime and offenders is long overdue; the social cost is too great to ignore and current methods of dealing with it don't work.

The state has sanctioned killing, meted out brutality, and taken on the role of educator, therapist and now minder, in an effort to stop or persuade offenders from leading a crime filled life. But none of these approaches have worked, crimes are still committed, the financial cost of extending the arm of the state has soared and lives and potential continues to be wasted.

Chris Grayling will not succeed in his efforts to stop crime by focusing on costs and handholding for vulnerable ex-offenders. Extending the role of the state beyond the end of a prison sentence by snooping on ex-offenders, not only requires a regular army of minders, but paves the way for permanent intervention and encroachment in all of our lives. Intervention robs us of autonomy, affects our ability to take control of our own life, and makes us more state reliant not less. Many ex-offenders have gone from one state institution to another and back again, (from care home to prison) with negative results for everyone.

Society needs a serious re-think regarding the welfarist state intervention route, it pervades too many aspects of our lives already. It is time to take that prison key and unlock the prison gates, put on the white suit, forensically examine, and work out how to deal effectively with what we find there. Or, in an age when leaders are clueless and regularly defer to celebs on all matters, maybe we should just sit back and wait for a Pryce/Huhne book, as after six weeks inside, they are now celebrity experts, and in the absence of true leadership, it is they who know best!