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Mr Cameron, there ought to be more old lags in Whitehall

The prime minister plans to revolutionise jails so prisoners leave rehabilitated and ready for work. But there are many obstacles, including the government's own reluctance to employ former offenders, writes ex-con Jonathan Aitken

Jonathan Aitken Published: 18 October 2015



The image of prison officers may be stuck in the era of *Porridge*, with Ronnie Barker and Fulton Mackay, but the best officers know the system is broken and are willing to change it

Michael Gove is making waves as justice secretary with his promises of the most radical overhaul of the prison system in more than half a century. Enthusiastically backed by the prime minister and the Tory conference, whose mindset has made a U-turn since the days when Edwina Currie was cheered to the rafters for brandishing a pair of handcuffs, the prospects for a rehabilitation revolution sound hopeful.

Yet hope has to be mixed with scepticism. Bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality may be challenging in the face of cost-cutting by the chancellor and traditional sentencing from the judiciary.

Take, for example, the prime minister's pledge: "When prisoners are in jail, let's treat their problems, educate them, put them to work." Gove went further, promising that prisons would be freed from drugs and turned into places of "hard work and rigorous education". Three cheers for such ministerial idealism! But the old blocking mechanisms on the wings, on the bench and in the Treasury may be obstacles to the new brooms of compassionate Conservatism.

"Aitken, stop weeding so fast," was my first reprimand as a prisoner. It was an indication of the bleak truth that work in most jails is a phoney exercise in time filling. In HMP Standford Hill, where I served much of my sentence, the 2½-hour lunch break, the four 30-minute tea breaks and the three 20-minute smoking breaks (granted equally to non-smokers) created a "down tools" atmosphere worthy of Peter Sellers in *I'm All Right Jack*.

Yielding to this typical culture of institutional indolence the Prison Service long ago abandoned its own underwhelming target for inmates to do three hours a day of so-called "purposeful activity". The last annual report of Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons gave a "dismal" picture of inadequate facilities for prison work and education. These outcomes for 2014-15 were the worst in a decade with 20% of inmates spending less than two hours a day out of their cells.

Creating new industrial workshops or new classrooms and teachers to fulfil the Gove vision of prison academies will be prohibitively expensive in a period when the offender management service's budget faces cuts of another 25% on top of the 30% reduction in the last parliament.

New healthcare services will be costly. At present at least a third of prison inmates have untreated mental health problems. There is at present no funding at all in jails for the treatment of alcoholism, which affects 65% of inmates and is linked to 45% of violent crime. Drug abuse programmes have been cut by 40% in recent years. So have many other therapy programmes, from anger management courses to art classes. Such negatives abound, justifying the chief inspector's gloomy conclusion that prisons are in their "worst [state] for 10 years". So where are the positives that might make the Cameron-Gove rehabilitation revolution happen?

The first priority is to get prison officers firmly behind the reforms. Difficult but doable. The prison service's image may be stuck with Porridge but its record has been progressive in delivering new practices such as economic benchmarking. The Prison Officers' Association leadership is becoming more moderate and more professional. The best officers know the system is broken and some are willing to work innovatively to change it.

Of all the prison charities I try to help, the one that fills me with greatest hope is Tempus Novo — founded and run by two Yorkshire prison officers to work in rehabilitation on both sides of the prison walls. Steve Freer and Val Wawrosz between them have 50 years of uniformed service as prison officers, most of it in tough nicks such as Wormwood Scrubs and Armley. Tired of being turnkeys, they now mentor young men on their wings at HMP Leeds who want to go straight.

Then they approach businesses in the Leeds-Bradford-Halifax area and persuade employers, sometimes with Geoffrey Boycott-style bluntness, to give their lads a second chance. In one year Steve and Val have found 40 jobs for their offenders on release. Tempus Novo's reoffending rate is a stunningly low 14%. It is being cheered on by local employers, councils, police commissioners and by Andrew Selous, the prisons minister, who wants to launch the scheme nationally.

David Cameron made an interesting reference in his conference speech to the cost savings that could be achieved by greater use of electronic tagging. He is right.

In January 2000 I was one of Britain's earliest taggees. My 60 days as an electronically monitored home detention curfew prisoner cost less than £4,000. My previous 150 days as an incarcerated prisoner cost about £45,000. So the scope for cost savings led by electronically monitored non-custodial sentences is considerable.

So also are the financial and employment results that might be achieved by Gove's idea of offering earned early release to prisoners who achieve educational or vocational qualifications.

However, these tweaks to the system will barely dent today's prison population of 86,000. For the Gove-Cameron agenda to succeed, a rehabilitation revolution will have to be matched by a sentencing revolution.

This is where compassionate Conservatism and judicial conservatism are likely to meet. Gove made a summer recess visit to Texas (a state better known for its high execution rate than its low reoffending rate) and has returned with some back-of-the-envelope ideas about specialist courts that might pass massively fewer prison sentences.

This blue-sky thinking is unlikely to gain popular acceptance unless a completely new consensus on judicial punishments arises from an improbable coalition of opinion shapers ranging from the lord chief justice to the editor of the Daily Mail.

So dream on . . . unless there emerges (as it just might) a completely new level of political commitment to penal reform of a kind that has never been applied by a prime minister to this unfashionable backwater of government. I know that Cameron is sincere in his endeavour. But like most prime ministers he will not have time for detail — and that is where the devils abound in our penal system.

The highest single priority in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders is helping them find jobs. Nacro, the crime prevention charity of which I am a trustee, is making a study of the obstacles to such employment. Guess which big employer is the worst discriminator when it comes to rejecting job applications, without an interview, from those who disclose they have a criminal record? Answer: Her Majesty's government, often by its own human resources departments but almost as a matter of routine by its legion of subcontractors.

A small administrative change on job application forms requiring them to comply with the best non-discriminatory employment practices of the likes of Boots, Virgin, Sainsbury's and the law firm Freshfields could bring at least 5,000 more ex-offenders a year into employment. Such small details need attention by our compassionate Conservative leaders as well as the big policy sweeps of prison reform.

The reformers might have to settle for a change in the culture by evolution rather than revolution. Chris Grayling's underestimated community rehabilitation companies are worth developing. So are the localised initiatives of the best community charities.

Turning around a broken penal system will take more time, more public money and more attention to detail than Gove's speeches have suggested. But he has made a good start.

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 **Lettie Maclean**

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