

Comment

Getting out of prison is only the first step



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Jim Devine, the former MP, will face many further trials on his return to society

Most prisoners have problems to face after their release from jail. For those who have led their previous lives in the public eye, there are likely to be special difficulties. The release of the former Labour MP Jim Devine, who walked free this week after serving four months of his 16-month sentence for expenses fraud, is a reminder of the coming exodus of parliamentary sinners, who will have to work hard to adjust to their new lives as ex-offenders. What are the pitfalls and prospects ahead of them?

Having stumbled along this same difficult path more than 11 years ago, I now find myself surprisingly busy in correspondence with fallen former colleagues – including Jim Devine. Once they have learnt to survive on Planet Prison, the wiser ones soon realise that their re-entry into a society that can,

paradoxically, be both forgiving and judgmental, will present formidable challenges to a high-profile ex-con.

In anyone's post-release journey, there are mistakes to be avoided, such as self-pity, self-importance, and the carrying of baggage: becoming weighed down by resentment towards others who got away with the same crime, or of the adversaries who exposed the original wrongdoing. This is fresh start time – difficult enough in itself, but impossible if you are brooding with ancient bitternesses.

What started to cure me of some of these obvious errors was a colourful piece of prison vernacular. Walking around the exercise yard in HMP Belmarsh, I was cornered by an ancient mariner of the underworld who poured out a tale of woe in which everyone but himself was to blame. When I extracted myself, another old lag said: "Don't take any notice of him. He's just a Double Richard."

In translation (Richard the Third = bird; bird = jail time) this meant that the grumbler was serving his sentence twice over, because he was so angry with the judge, the jury, the witnesses, the unprosecuted members of his gang and so on that he had forgotten the pivotal importance of his own guilt for the crime he had committed. It is astonishing how easy it becomes – even among some of my otherwise sensible correspondents – for law-breakers to focus on the hard luck, bad luck, and unfair dimensions of their stories, and to discount their own wrongdoing.

Once they are out of prison, and have

killed off the *Look Back in Anger* instinct, there are uncomfortable realities to be faced. Instead of being a somebody, you are a nobody. Many people who once looked up to you now look down on you. Those who might once have given you a leg-up (especially as potential employers) might not want to touch you with a bargepole. So it is essential to be a self-starter, proactive in your search for a new and more modest role as you try to begin again at a lower level in the pecking order.

In any journey of rehabilitation, your friends are crucial players. One of the most frequent observations made to me in recent years has been: "Well, I expect you found out who your friends were." This is true – but the nature of the friendships, or the absence of them, contained many surprises.

Most of us are fortunate if we can count our closest friends – those grappled to our soul, as Shakespeare said, with "hoops of steel" – on the fingers of one hand. My best friends were rock-solid in their support, however much they disapproved of my folly. In my wider circles of acquaintanceship, there were both heartening gestures of support and disappointing vanishing acts.

One surprise in the former category arrived in the form of a phone call two days after I had emerged into the world of freedom. "Denis Thatcher here," said the voice at the other end of the line. "Would you do me the honour of coming to lunch with me at my club?" At a time when most of my own clubs were expunging my name from their membership books, lunch with Denis was a rocket-booster for

my morale. He was one of several unexpected friends who, in their different ways, came up trumps.

Part of the problem with re-entry is that most ex-offenders are slightly unhinged, subject to the feverish mood swings of jail life. Depression and elation, hope and fear, trust and mistrust ebb and flow daily, rather as they did on the prison wing. So, one good tip is to take life slowly at first. Like a diver decompressing from the depths, you need time as you gradually come to the surface. The key factor here is the support of your family. If that settles down to normality – which may require forgiveness from the nearest and dearest of the one who turned their lives upside down – then other relationships will begin to be reaffirmed, too. This can be a bumpy ride, involving personal pain and penitence, but it is an essential part of the rehabilitation process.

Sooner or later, practicalities arise – such as discovering how to occupy a day which was once busy with public engagements. In my own journey, I was fortunate to be able to go back to university, to become active in the work of offender rehabilitation, to enjoy the life of a professional writer and to be blessed by a loving family and a firm faith. A rocky road at times, but I have found happiness and fulfilment on it. So I wish all other bruised public figures a similar outcome, even though I know they will face a tough climb on the first steps after their release.

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