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**Our jails are cauldrons of unrest but cool thinking can keep the lids on**



Many of our prisons have become simmering cauldrons of dangerous discontent. They are going through a period of crisis whose toxic ingredients include record suicide, self-harming and violent assault figures; two serious disturbances last week that had to be quelled by riot-trained officers; widespread drug abuse and chronic understaffing.

One former prison governor, Ian Acheson, said on Newsnight last week that the army should be called in, while the president of the Prison Governors Association, Andrea Albutt, publicly attacked her bosses at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) for policy failures. Do such signals suggest that the cauldrons are about to boil over?

As a former prisoner, who now serves as an office holder with 11 criminal justice charities, frequently visiting jails across the country, I look at the problems with both a bird’s eye and a worm’s eye view from several angles. Some are positive.

Our prison system is not a monolithic continent but an archipelago of 117 distinctive establishments of which well over half are calm, resilient and reasonably well run. There is good work being done behind the bad headlines.

However, the biggest change since I was “doing my bird” with an 18-month sentence for perjury at Belmarsh, Elmley and Standford Hill (respectively A, C and D category jails) in 1999-2000 is that the crucial relationship between prisoners and prison officers has deteriorated sharply.

Prisons run by consent. Angry antagonism between cons and screws used to be rare. Throughout my sentence I was pleasantly surprised by the chemistry of mutual respect on the wings between jailers and jailed.

Today the picture looks disturbingly different, largely because of staffing cuts. In the past seven years the number of prison officers has been reduced from 25,000 to 18,000, a fall of 28%. By contrast the number of prisoners has increased by 16%, many of them with an increased propensity towards violence influenced by gangs and by new psychoactive drugs such as “spice”.

These trends are reflected in the almost unbelievable statistics that show that in the past year all records were broken in English and Welsh prisons by 40,161 self-harming incidents, 344 deaths in custody (120 of them suicides) and 26,022 assaults, of which 6,844 were on staff, 650 of them serious.

No wonder morale among prison officers has been plummeting. No wonder it is widely accepted that George Osborne’s cuts in the prison budget went dangerously deep. Why three successive justice secretaries (Ken Clarke, Chris Grayling and Michael Gove) did not warn and fight against these cuts, as a Willie Whitelaw or a Douglas Hurd would surely have done, remains a disappointing mystery.

At least Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service is now belatedly struggling to repair the damage by recruiting 2,500 better paid new officers. But the attrition rate of resignations from the service is simultaneously accelerating. Some early figures suggest there has so far been a net gain of only 75 staff.

An anecdote from my past prison experience may help illuminate today’s problem. One afternoon in July 1999 a fight broke out among a group of prisoners on B wing of Belmarsh during association (break time). It got nasty. Alarm bells pealed. In less than two minutes at least 30 officers thundered on to our wing and overpowered the combatants, one of whom was wielding a knife. We inmates were immediately banged up behind our cell doors, rather gratefully in most cases. Order was swiftly and authoritatively restored.

Earlier this year I encountered a retired Belmarsh officer with whom I relived the incident. He said: “It wouldn’t be like that now. You would be lucky if you could find seven or eight members of the officers’ heavy brigade available to stop a fight.”

It is not just the prison officers who are fearful and fed up. The grievances of the prisoners deserve a hearing too.

An unexpected surge of some 1,600 new prisoners sentenced by the courts this summer has strained the already acute overcrowding problem to breaking point. This could be relieved if the authorities would ease tensions by reconsidering the problems of two groups of inmates whose situations make them feel justifiably upset.

One is the 3,200 tariff-expired IPP (imprisonment for public protection) inmates who have completed the recommended maximum terms of their original sentences. There is an injustice here delaying their overdue releases.

A second group consists of about 3,500 prisoners who have been recalled to prison for minor breaches of the terms of their release licences. These recalls in 55% of cases are not for reoffending but for small transgressions such as unpunctuality in keeping appointments. The recalls are made solely on the instruction of an often junior probation staff member.

If the grievances of IPP and recalled prisoners could be addressed this would create much needed headroom by freeing up about 6,000 prison places.

There are, however, some improvements that the vocal prison interest and pressure groups may have underestimated. The £100m of extra spending on prisons secured from the Treasury last November (with strong support from Theresa May) seems to be working better than is publicly known.

A dedicated unit of recruitment specialists within the MoJ, chaired twice weekly by Sam Gyimah, an able prisons minister, feels the tide may have turned on prison officer numbers. When the latest statistics for the second half of the year are released on August 17 they are likely to show a net increase of more than 600 in prison staffing levels — and rising. A pending pay review award may further boost these figures.

The funds have also been invested in new technologies that have already proved effective in detecting illegal mobiles and thwarting drug smuggling by drones. In several prisons excellent rehabilitation work is being done by good works groups such as the Clink restaurants, Timpson and Tempus Novo.

My forecast for the prison crisis is that it will be contained by hand-to-mouth measures in individual establishments with continuing sporadic trouble but without widespread explosions.

What is now needed is a national debate. Should we spend more public money on new prisons with additional and better paid staff? Or should we take measures to reduce the prison population by about 10% to give the headroom in which decent conditions can flourish? In a report I have co-authored with Judge John Samuels QC for the Centre for Social Justice, to be published on September 7, we hope to make a contribution to this debate.

**Jonathan Aitken was chief secretary to the Treasury from 1994-95**

**Adam Boulton is away**