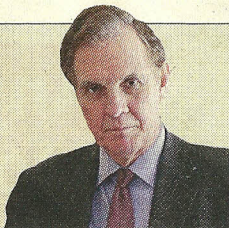


Prison works. It's outside that it all goes wrong

Many ex-prisoners long to go straight. They reoffend because we let them down when they reach the jail gates

Jonathan Aitken



During my seven months in jail I learnt a great deal about the thoughts and motivations of prisoners. Going to jail is not seen as a particular problem — for many youngsters it is part of the pattern of estate life.

But while they don't fear jail, they do relish the chance to go straight. This is the crucial characteristic recognised in Ken Clarke's bold new strategy for reducing reoffending. Throughout my sentence I spent two to three hours a day reading and writing letters for fellow inmates who struggled with literacy and communication problems — an experience that leads me to be highly supportive of the Justice Secretary's new approach. It is rooted in the practical "rehabilitation revolution" promised in opposition policy statements.

It makes good sense at the sharp end in terms of preventing crime and from the Treasury's perspective of cutting public spending. But delivering the strategy will require from ministers a remorseless attention to detail and a continuous exercise of political will to overcome the many obstacles.

The coalition Government's policy

takes us into new territory from past debates about whether prison works. Of course it does (as Mr Clarke acknowledged yesterday) in the sense that imprisonment protects the public from many violent and dangerous criminals who need to be locked up.

But prison also fails because it and the National Offender Management Service have been so poor at reducing stubbornly high reoffending rates.

These have risen by 8 per cent in the past two years. As a result, about 74 per cent of young short-sentence prisoners and 60 per cent of all adult prisoners reoffend within two years of release. This failure, which Mr Clarke calls "the revolving door of crime", will never be reversed by the ingrained bureaucratic inertia that characterises the service. Its £5 billion budget (only £2 billion of which goes on prisons)

We must move into the world of gritty, grotty jobs for ex-cons

can safely be reduced, redirected and better spent now that the Justice Secretary has set the reduction of reoffending as the strategic priority of his department.

Now for the detail. The rehabilitation of offenders is a hands-on job involving face-to-face hard work. There is a lot of good practice around. Some of it comes from professionals in the prison and probation service, but they tend to be hopelessly overworked and poorly

managed. Government figures show that a probation officer spends only 24 per cent of his or her time in direct contact with the offenders under their supervision — including telephone calls. The rest is spent on paperwork, usually connected with achieving, or more likely not achieving, central government targets. No wonder so many in the probation world feel demoralised and sidelined by the bigger and better-funded prison service.

From my experience of trying to help offenders after release I understand the importance of one-on-one rehabilitation. It means meeting at the prison gate, a weekly cup of coffee, help with job applications, listening to the problems of chaotic lifestyles, words of encouragement and of warning, above all communicating the feeling that someone actually cares whether Burglar Bill or Unsteady Eddie, the former addict, tries to go and stays straight. Welcome to the real and bespoke tailoring world of caring for ex-offenders.

This work is often best done at local level by trained volunteers and smaller charities, even if they are ultimately supervised by the probation service or a company such as Serco. Blue Sky, one of two charities with which I'm involved, employs more ex-offenders than any other organisation in the country: 100 in 2009, 200 in 2010 and rising. Blue Sky's jobs are at the rough and low-skill end of local authority contract work — waste disposal, grass cutting, gravedigging, repairing pavements and maintaining buildings.

The charity, founded by Mick May, a former City banker, has a repeat offending rate of 15 per cent among its employees — a quarter of the national average. I and my fellow patron Erwin James (an ex-lifer and *Guardian* columnist) are immensely proud of what Blue Sky is achieving. We know that Mr Clarke is right to be enlarging the work of rehabilitation beyond the bureaucratic jobsworths of the offender management service and into

All the money spent on detox was gone in a puff of smoke

the hands-on world of gritty, grotty but real employment of ex-cons.

Before employment must come a stable lifestyle. When I was chairing the Centre for Social Justice's 2009 report *Locked Up Potential: A Strategy for Reforming Prisons and Rehabilitating Prisoners*, I spent one or two illuminating early mornings in Jebb Avenue, Brixton, at the time when prisoners are released. Some of the men coming out were met by family or friends, but most drifted away from the prison gate looking lonely and disorientated. Guess who eventually greeted them? The local drug dealers. Within minutes all the money spent on their detox programmes — and all their good intentions — were gone in a puff of smoke.

Caring for Ex-Offenders is one of several good charities specialising in

gate meetings and training volunteers for working to get ex-offenders' lives back on track. Research suggests that there is a pool of at least 20-30,000 volunteers willing to work at local level with rehabilitating offenders. Alas, the prison service is volunteer-unfriendly. That's another part of the culture that Mr Clarke and his team will have to change.

Conservative Party culture needs to change too. There are still discordant voices calling for longer sentences, prison ships, harsher regimes and other failed nostrums. But the best politicians make their own weather. Iain Duncan Smith is doing it on welfare reform. Mr Clarke, another former future Prime Minister, has found the strength of purpose to risk unpopularity by giving a clear lead on the criminal justice system.

He has had the vision to see that less public expenditure is the friend, not the enemy, of prison reform. So a huge change in sentencing, imprisonment and the management of offenders is on its way. It will indeed be a rehabilitation revolution if the Ministry of Justice does the detailed work needed to implement its Secretary of State's masterplan.

OpEd Live from 1pm

Jonathan Aitken and an ex-prisoner discuss the road to rehabilitation
thetimes.co.uk/opinion