

scottish justice matters

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CHANGING TIMES

Special features on the reforms facing Scotland's criminal justice system

Also

Problem-Solving Courts

Interview with
HM Chief Inspector of
Prisons, Hugh Monro



REFORM
IN SCOTTISH CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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Scottish Justice Matters is a publication of the Scottish Consortium of Crime and Criminal Justice (SCCCJ). The Consortium is an alliance of organisations and individuals committed to better criminal justice policies. It works to stimulate well informed debate and to promote discussion and analysis of new ideas: it seeks a rational, humane, constructive and rights-based approach to questions of justice and crime in Scotland.

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Shortly after announcing his retirement **Brigadier Hugh Monro** talked to **Nancy Loucks** about his four years as Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland.

BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF



NL: Coming here from the army would be quite a change; is there anything that took you by surprise about coming into prisons?

HM: I was absolutely astounded by how many drugs are smuggled into prison. I was appalled by the way families of prisoners were treated. And I thought how prison staff were valued, and the lack of training and development they received. A lot of these things I put down into my areas of special interest and have continued to develop that as I've gone through the job.

In talking to people, is there anything a prisoner or a member of staff said that's really stuck with you?

The first prison I went to, I met a young man and I asked a question which I've never asked again. I said "And why are you here?" And he told me he'd murdered a close member of his family. I've never ever asked a prisoner since, the offence that they've committed to be in prison. I've always felt that was a question that shouldn't be asked by a Chief Inspector, unless they volunteer the information. I'll ask them how long they're in for, but I won't ask precisely the offence they've committed. And that answer I must say shook me to the core.

Have you changed your mind about anything related to prisons during your time as Chief Inspector?

I'm a lot more optimistic. I think there were times in the first two or three years where I was deeply pessimistic. I felt I was not getting my message across. There were horrible things going on that I was reporting in a perfectly sensible, measured fashion, and I was being in some cases patronised and in other cases ignored. And that irritated me. So now that I think we've got sensible leadership in Calton House [Scottish Prison Service Headquarters], I am much more optimistic than I was. And I genuinely feel the Prison Service is going to modernise and improve. I think transformational change is absolutely there.

I think the only other thing I have changed my mind about is that I used to be of the view that short prison sentences were not a good idea. I've come to view that, in certain specific instances, short sentences may just be the only answer. Community Payback is a great start, but there is a long way to go in terms of developing that and making sure that community justice is timely, robust, and actually does deal with the underlying behavioural problem, whether it be drink or drugs or violence or whatever. And addressing that can be just as demanding as the punishment. There is a way to go on community dealings in this way, and until that is done, short sentences may be the only alternative.

What do you think is your greatest achievement during your time as Chief Inspector?

I'm immensely proud of my team and what the Inspectorate does. I think that people who work for me have worked to make the Inspectorate actually do a job that has to be done really well, and I think you have to keep working at that. I think the standing of the Inspectorate is high within the Prison Service, and with prisoners. When the Inspectorate comes around, people do want to connect, and that's made the job a lot easier. The Prisons Inspectorate should never say it's satisfied, but we're at a stage where it is actually doing a good piece of work.

I'm happy we've focused on young people. There's a long way to go on this, but I think that the report on Polmont was a wake-up call for Scotland. I'm proud of the way we've dealt with Cornton Vale and female offenders, and I'm delighted it caused a national change through Elish Angiolini's Commission. But of course a lot of what she was looking at affect men just as much. There's still a very long way to go on delivering a criminal justice system that will deliver for people in it. But I do feel that Scotland will deal with female offenders in a much more forward-looking way in the future, and I think we will treat them in a way that will improve them. What we found at Cornton Vale three and a half years ago was truly shocking and unacceptable. I'm upset it's taken us so long to get to a sensible place, but things are no longer in crisis, and that's something I'm proud of.

Is there anything else that you feel you've left undone?

I think the whole piece over family visitors' centres is not yet finished. We need to see some real delivery; I would like to think that in ten years time, a prisoner's family could walk into a visitors' centre and plug in to different services and be really included in the way that they live their lives, but also how they are going to give the prisoner on release a better and a more joined-up life; and that families will no longer be stigmatised by imprisonment. We can't go on demeaning people in this way, because it's not a way that a modern society should be behaving, and I just hope that this will go some way to change that. I still look back on seeing families leaving a visit in tears and think "That's no way for this to be".

If you were creating the ideal prison system from scratch, what key elements would it have?

I'm a great believer in 'prevention is better than cure', and I would love to see a Scotland where we genuinely are going to break the cycle. The only way for post-industrial Scotland to change is to bring up future generations in a way that they can break that cycle, that they can live a normal, sensible, fulsome life. So I think we've got to focus on young people, and I think the Government's quite right to be looking at Early Years. I think that's absolutely essential.

I'd love to see an education system which is much more holistic and inclusive. And I think we have to have an education system that is much more than just school. And when I say 'inclusive', I mean everyone needs to be included, and school exclusions should be, in my view, against the law. We have to have inclusion, otherwise we're just storing up trouble.

I would have a prison system that could take no more than 5,000 people. We should be looking at those offences that require a prison sentence, therefore you need a community justice system that has real alternatives [and] really does deal with underlying issues. I'm a great believer in restorative justice. I think we must include victims in a better way, much more mediation, and demanded by law.

I would demand that our prisons provide activity related to prisoners' individual risks and needs. I still see far too many prisoners sitting in their cells or halls, not being improved in a way that is going to give them a real chance when they get out. And I think there needs to be far more requirement laid on the Prison Service to deliver a proper learning experience.

I would make sure that every prisoner would have to be delivered from prison into society in a properly mentored and monitored way. Getting back to the community is not an easy thing. It's the same for soldiers coming back from an operational tour in Afghanistan. And so, given the amount of money we're spending on each and every individual prisoner, I think the taxpayer deserves a return on their money, and I think the individual offender, on returning to the community, should have that support and guidance.

Are there particular characteristics that your ideal prison system would not include?

I think prisons can be demeaning, and that's odd for people who are lacking in self-confidence. I think there has to be more connection between prison officers and prisoners. I think the staff in the Scottish Prison Service are a tremendous resource, and I see really fantastic prison officers. But they could be so much better if they were continuously trained and developed. So I would make the culture of prisons develop much more. I think we mustn't assume that, just because we value our Prison Service, that everything is perfect in the garden, because it's not, and I think a thing that's on Colin McConnell's [chief executive of the SPS] agenda is to greatly improve the training and development of staff. And it needs to be.

I'd make prisons much more technically joined up. If you keep asking 'Where will we be in ten years' time?', I would like to think that every prison would have a computerised prisoner management system, so every individual is plugged into a database that allows you to manage and timetable in a much more sensible and efficient and individualised way. But we're still doing things on carbon paper. I mean, this is Stone Age stuff, and actually we've got to get with it.

How would you sum up your advice to your successor?

I think 'Be true to yourself'. To have a lay Chief Inspector of Prisons is a remarkable opportunity because you bring to it a completely different angle. I have spent my whole time asking questions, the most important question being, 'But why do you do it like that?' Because the answer is, 'Because we've always done it that way', and it's the wrong answer.

So, be true to yourself. Don't be browbeaten by the system. Don't feel that anyone else knows more than you do. They might know more than you do, but don't let that appear. And keep your head above the parapet, because it'll be fine.

What are your future plans?

I would still like to help Colin McConnell [Chief Executive, Scottish Prison Service] in some way, and I would be delighted to do so. I'm immensely proud of the Prison Service. I think they do an incredibly complicated job. There are lots of things that need to improve. But people do a remarkable job. [Prisoners] are Scotland's most challenging people, in all sorts of different ways, and it is a very difficult job, and that's why you need a Prisons Inspectorate, to help the Prison Service do it.

Note: more information on Scotland's Prison Inspectorate may be found on www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/public-safety/offender-management/offender/custody/Prisons/hmip

Listen to an audio recording of this interview in full at www.scottishjusticematters.com

Brigadier Hugh Monro will retire as Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland in June 2013.

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