Prison: What is it good for?
Opinion piece by Jane Turner  May 2013

The supremacy of imprisonment as a way of dealing with offenders has never been seriously challenged, even though there is plenty of evidence to show that it does not work, as either a form of punishment or a place of rehabilitation. But in the last few months, crime, punishment, and UK prisons have been in the news regularly. The Coalition government, has enormous and growing debts, and has been reviewing all public services to identify where they can make cuts, and as spending on prisons is high (£50,000 per year, per offender) they have been taking a closer look. Highlighting the glaringly high re-offending rate and the failure of prisons to rehabilitate and prevent re-offending.

Chris Grayling, the Justice Minister has announced a review and a number of new cost-cutting initiatives, describing the current arrangements as “a bad return on investment”. Ideas already mooted include compulsory work or education for offenders in order to earn their privileges, such as Sky TV – a tightening of the existing regime. He has also announced a mentoring scheme, which relies on ex-offenders or other providers (reporting to the state) to “support” (police) newly released offenders for a period of 12 months, to prevent them re-offending. The mentoring idea includes practical support in finding work and housing, and has received some
initial positive appraisal – but is untested and likely to take eons. Both schemes are attempts to educate, influence and control offenders, to make them change their offending behaviour by offering incentives, and will not please the “hang ‘em and flog ‘em” brigade who insist that punishment is the answer. Rehabilitation or punishment? Two established methods for dealing with offenders, neither of which has had a significant impact on reducing crime. So, just how should we treat those who break society’s laws?

The treatment of offenders has come a long way since the days of racks, ducking, guillotines, gallows, birching, flogging, hard labour, and transportation. Originally, prisons were simply places to hold people while awaiting a range of gruesome punishments, and then became a form of punishment themselves, depriving offenders of their liberty and protecting society from their menacing ways. Nelson Mandela, one of the world’s most famous political offenders, spent almost 20 of his 27 years in jail, confined to a small cell, the floor was his bed, and he had a bucket for a toilet. He was forced to do hard labour in a quarry, received one letter every six months, and was allowed one 30-minute visit a year. The prison officials were as brutal as the conditions and it is a testament to the man and his will that he survived such an ordeal. Many Northern Irish political offenders were regularly and viciously beaten, and locked in shit smeared cells for years with maggot-infested mattresses to sleep on in the infamous Maze prison. Look back through the history books even further and the brutality and inhumanity shown to those who broke the laws of society are difficult for mollycoddled modern day citizens to contemplate. Yet, despite such horrific punishment, people still committed crime.

Reformers were successful in abolishing the death penalty, hard labour, cruel and punitive regimes and for changing the purpose of prisons. They established the idea that for most inmates, prisons should be places of reform and rehabilitation, where they could learn the skills to support themselves when released, and they introduced programmes of work and education. Modern day prisons incorporate a vast range of services from different providers, allowing participants to work and earn money, learn and get qualifications and get psychological help for an increasing list of disorders. So, instead of bumps and bruises, offenders now leave institutions with work experience, a handful of qualifications, a boost to their self-esteem, and a wad of cash, but…. they still commit crime. The re-offending rate is high (around 30%), and the prisons are full of new and repeat offenders.
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Crime is a broad and changeable concept, differing across time and place, but in essence, you commit a crime and get a criminal record if you break one of the laws of society, of which of course, there are many. People are imprisoned for playing music too loudly and disturbing their neighbours, claiming benefits fraudulently, stealing electricity by bypassing the meter and driving without due care and attention. Many have been drunk in a public place and some have driven a car without a licence or insurance, have not paid business VAT or income tax correctly, and shoplifted for themselves or others. Quite a few have been vandals, and some have stolen from their employer. Some have received stolen goods, left the scene of an accident, inflicted grievous bodily harm, burgled houses, and shops, and carried drugs into the country and then sold them to others. Some are illegal immigrants, caught working without the relevant documentation, and many are prostitutes of one description or another. A small number have murdered their own offspring, some have murdered their partners, and others have beaten or murdered strangers in random acts of extreme violence. Types and patterns of crime differ between men and women, and men commit the majority of crimes (approximately 80000 of the total prison population of 85000 is male). Offenders and their crimes are categorised and then offenders are housed in different institutions depending on that category.

Prison is not quite like the "holiday camp" one hears talk of, offenders are denied their freedom and contained within the walls of the institution. They have no choice about who they share a cell with, about what they eat and drink, and restricted choices relating to work and education. Yes, many of them have televisions and they can use the gym and get regular food and a warm if rather small hard bed. They also get to see their loved ones at pre-arranged visit times but may not be allowed to touch or kiss them. They can write and receive letters and make occasional phone calls under certain circumstances, but they still have to follow the prison regime. They get up when told, eat when told, wash and toilet when told, go to bed when told, do as they are told. The consequence of disobedience is the denial of some of their basic privileges, such as loss of TV, loss of association with other offenders, solitary confinement and being denied permission to attend work, education or exercise for a defined period of time. Offenders say the harshest punishment is the denial or restriction of visits from friends and family and the loss of their freedom.
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In addition to attending classes in a range of subjects, many offenders “work” within the prison shop, including cigarettes, sweets and their own tea and coffee supplies. This is an example of how prisoners may engage in regular work and some qualifications. But, there are many more who when “inside”, get up for their long days and nights with work and study and leave with their first ever experience of punishment is a thing of the past.

When almost everyone is seen as some sort of victim and in need of some sort of therapy, it is no serious paper on real life crime. So, a serious discussion about how society deals with crime isn’t so liberal about rehabilitation?

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When we look at the way for permanent intervention and encroachment in all of our lives. Intervention robs us of our autonomy, affects our ability to take control of our own life, and makes us more state reliant not free to think and to change. The fact that so many offenders go back to prison time and time again, is perhaps the best proof that prison really serves. Despite our obsession with crime and offenders - the TV schedules are full of programmes dealing with it don’t work.

What does rehabilitation actually mean? The word itself has become associated with offenders, and now minder, in an effort to stop or persuade offenders from leading a crime filled life. But does rehabilitation mean the removal of our innate freedom and right to think and to act in our way?

Socialist Worker said that restricting TV access to offenders is an attack on vulnerable people! It is hardly surprising that society is confused about how to treat offenders, when we look at the ruling elite, who bereft of a philosophy and any forward looking ideas, continue to take us all backwards. When there is confusion about the direction of society and uncertainty of purpose, hell (even with the TV on). But for others? Well, you only have to look at the re-offending rate, to find there. Or, in an age when leaders are clueless and regularly defer to “celebs” on all matters, extending the role of the state beyond the end of a prison sentence, and where whole life sentences are extremely rare. Retributive punishment or places of rehabilitation; they are as messed up as many public institutions, as inefficient and a massive waste of public money. I question the madness, efficiency, and futility of prison, no serious discussion about how to deal with crime.

Society needs a serious re-think regarding the welfarist state intervention route, it pervades too much. Spiked (www.spiked.co.uk) wrote an interesting piece on TV and offenders. Chris Grayling will not succeed in his efforts to stop crime by focusing on costs and handholding offenders as some sort of victim and in need of some sort of therapy. Extending the role of the state beyond the end of a prison sentence, is to turn the prison into a sort of workhouse, for “vulnerable” ex-offenders. Extending the role of the state beyond the end of a prison sentence, is to turn the prison into a sort of workhouse, for “vulnerable” ex-offenders.

Spiked wrote, “The sky is not the limit: after ten years in prison, we are not only allowed to watch television again, we are also taken on “day release” to work with real employers. They have in-house “bank” accounts into which their prison wages are placed and they use these accounts to pay for their work expenses. If they are paid more than the cost of their expenses, the remainder is paid into a savings account for their release. Many offenders thus manage to save up a considerable sum of money. Some actually embrace it as a true mark of their character. One offender told me his mother has asked him to save “for a rainy day” and he is saving for a rainy day because he was not always able to get out. He is now a real man and a real man has a rainy day fund.”

Marx said, “Question everything”, and I do. I question the role of prisons as either places of punishment or places of rehabilitation. They are as messed up as many public institutions, as inefficient and a massive waste of public money. I question the madness, efficiency, and futility of prison, no serious discussion about how to deal with crime. Do prisons rehabilitate people? Again, yes and no. Some embrace the rehabilitation process, fill their old habits. But, there are many more who when “inside”, get up for their long days and nights with work and study and leave with their first ever experience of punishment is a thing of the past.