

## **Prisons Reformed?** or “What are those tents doing in the prison yard?”

Parallels were drawn between the situation in UK prisons and those in Brazil when Juliet Lyon of the Prison Reform Trust and Dr Fiona Macaulay of Bradford University spoke at the Saturday Seminar of the Criminal Justice Group held on the 17<sup>th</sup> May 2014. In both countries the state prisons are overcrowded, recidivism is the norm and the majority of the prisoners come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Brazil however, the state prisons are far, far worse, so bad in fact that the prisoners have taken over the prisons as a way of restoring order amidst the violence and the murders. Each prison has its own particular Gang (both inside and outside) and a prisoner is allocated to the prison of his Gang. They are described as “Pure hell”.

Yet it is in Brazil that there has evolved a new type of prison which the prisoners term “Pure heaven”. Begun in the 1970’s by a group of concerned lay Catholics the idea was to run them on humane lines with a view to the rehabilitation of the prisoners as “decent people” when they went back into the community. Community was a crucial part of the concept: prisons were kept local and kept small; families of prisoners were involved (indeed families would bring back any of their kin who escaped!) and volunteers from the community helped run the prisons alongside the prisoners.

The contrast between the state run prisons and the new variety (known as APACS) was described in a letter from a man in an APAC prison to a friend in a ‘normal’ prison. Phrases such as “We were given lunch – as much as we wanted, all home cooked” “I had a shower and it was HOT” “The toilet had a seat” “People are polite”. Photos showed us gardens with fountains amongst well designed buildings. Interestingly the men were housed fourteen to a ‘cell’. This was designed to give them the opportunity to develop self care, mutual care and community care by way of negotiations and responsibility.

The whole point of the APAC prisons, we were told, was to re-socialise the prisoners. A very memorable recollection by Dr Macaulay was of a prison yard full of small tents - in the pouring rain. “What’s going on” she asked. “Oh it’s conjugal visits day” she was told. Such visits not only reduce male on male rape and violence but keep family relationships strong and help address hyper-masculinity by emphasising men as husbands, fathers and sons.

It works. It costs less, the reoffending rate is less, human rights are better. And it is being tried elsewhere. Could it work here – particularly with Young Offenders or with women?

Both speakers agreed on the need for prison reform in the UK. Juliet Lyon explained how deep rooted are the problems in British prisons and how difficult it is to effect change. The Prison Reform Trust works across party lines and across Government Departments in an effort to achieve change, even if it is piecemeal. To do this they commission research – one instance she cited was an enquiry into the experience of 6,000 under 18’s in the last 6 months of their detention. As a result of this they approached those Local Authorities with the greatest number of Young Offenders in custody and worked to show them the best practise of other authorities. This, plus working alongside the Youth Justice Board to change Police discretion, resulted in a drop of 55% of young people in custody. Youth crime has also fallen.

By influence and persuasion they have shone light on various problems and turned them around but they are facing the impact of the 23% cut in the Prison Budget with its consequent closure of small, local prisons, the increase in deaths in prison, the drop in the ratio of staff to prisoners and the rise in disturbances. Juliet and Fiona both agreed that prison is ineffective for those sentenced to less than six months custody, that smaller, local prisons work the best but most of all that Restorative Justice, used as a disposal of choice, was the way forward.

Philomena O'Hare May 2014

**Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile** is available from the Prison Reform Trust as is **What can I do?** a guide to volunteering and achieving change in the criminal Justice system. Some copies are still available t Carlton Hill Meeting house.