

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Penal Affairs

Chair: Paul Maynard MP

Vice Chairs: Lord Carlile; Carolyn Harris MP; Baroness Prashar; Marie Rimmer MP; Andrew Selous MP

Secretary: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts

MINUTES

**Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the All-Party Group on Penal Affairs, held on
23 May 2023**

**Guest Speaker: Andrea Albutt
President, Prison Governors Association**

Present

Paul Maynard MP (in the chair)
Lord Attlee
Lord Garnier
Lord Hodgson

Apologies

Carolyn Harris MP

Attendees

Julia Braggins, Minutes
Mark Day, PRT, Clerk
Alex Hewson, PRT

Mark Day, clerk to the group, welcomed everybody to the meeting, which was also the annual general meeting of the APPG. He was pleased to say that the chair, **Paul Maynard MP**, had been nominated and said he was happy to continue in office. No further nominations had been received, so he was pleased to confirm **Paul Maynard MP** in the role, to whom he would now hand over for the rest of the meeting.

Paul Maynard MP said that he was now pleased to nominate the vice chairs: those nominated were **Andrew Selous MP, Lord Carlile, Carolyn Harris MP; Baroness Prashar, Marie Rimmer MP**; and the Secretary: **Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts**. The meeting had been advertised in the All Party Notices in accordance with the rules, no other nominations had been received and, there being no objections from those present, those nominations were approved.

The financial statement had been circulated, and would be published on the APPG website. He wanted particularly to thank the Prison Reform Trust for providing the secretariat: **Mark Day**, Clerk to the group, **Pia Sinha**, PRT Director, the **Prison Reform Trust's Trustees** and **Chair James Timpson, Julia Braggins** who prepared the notes and **Zoe Burton** who provided the administrative support. He also wanted particularly to thank the **Trustees of the Barrow Cadbury Trust**, who provided the funding for the secretariat.

The formal business having been concluded, he was pleased to welcome the guest speaker, **Andrea Albutt, Chair of the Prison Governors Association**.

Andrea Albutt began by thanking the meeting for the invitation. She continued:

It is quite an important event for me because I am retiring at the end of the year so this is my chance to give you my reflections, particularly over my period as President of the Prison Governors Association (PGA). Very quickly, a little bit about me. I have been in the prison service for 34 years.

I started off as a prison officer and worked my way up. I have governed four prisons. My last prison was Bristol. It has been an interesting period, particularly recently. I was elected as Vice President of the PGA in 2010, and then as President in 2015, and I have been re-elected three times.

My talk to you focuses on the prison system from 2010 to present day. I am trying not to sound political or be critical of a specific party, but unfortunately this period covers the tenure of the Conservative Party. I have no doubt I would be saying similar things if there was another party administering our country. I want to show you how short-termism, party politics, constant changing of Secretaries of State, and personal ministerial priorities leave a system feeling like a political football, with no evidence of sustained improvement and often a legacy of dire consequences for all who live and work in prisons. This is my honest reflection of a prison system over the last 13 years.

In 2010, Justice Secretary Ken Clarke, inherited a Prison Service not perfect by any means, but performance was good, stability was good and self-inflicted deaths, whilst never wanted, were low. 'Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders' was published in June 2011 promising to end inefficiency and bureaucracy and make prisons places of hard work and training. Men and women would be expected to work a 40 hour week with money being deducted from these earnings to support victims' groups. Access to illicit drugs would be addressed with tighter security and those in prison with drug addiction would be placed in Drug Recovery Wings to address the scourge of the habit. This all sounded very promising, but initiatives like these require money and investment, both in infrastructure and people to deliver them. Mr Clarke was expected to make cuts due to the substantial reduction in the MOJ budget agreed with the Chancellor, so it was never going to be fully funded. Some money was forthcoming, but not enough to deliver such widespread change. Only a small number of prisons had workshop places which could accommodate prisoners working 40 hours a week. Most jails dabbled in these concepts but with little verve and commitment because it was almost an impossible task. This ministerial priority stopped when Mr Clarke was replaced by Chris Grayling.

In July 2011, Mr Clarke announced a competition strategy for nine existing prisons, eight of which were public sector. This process duly began, with the usual private and public sector deciding to bid for all prisons at significant cost to the public purse. Little did we know that this was the real start of the race to the bottom to achieve stringent cuts with far reaching consequences for prisons.

In 2012 Chris Grayling came into the Ministry with a clear agenda of reducing costs further whilst bringing in reform. His May 2013 'Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform' was very much built on Through the Gate Services (TTG), ensuring there was consistency between custody and community. A laudable concept and one which was absolutely right. In simple terms this is how it translated into policy. The National Probation Service as we knew it would be disbanded. Those people serving 12 months or less would now get supervision on release through the Community Rehabilitation Companies. Resettlement prisons would be created and men and women in prison would be located or returned to these prisons and benefit from the TTG Services. The highest risk offenders would continue to receive supervision from the much smaller National Probation Service. This policy was implemented, with dangerous consequences for prisons, and has since been fully reversed.

Research shows that a younger population and high churn increases instability. We all know the initial few weeks of first reception into prison are the riskiest with violence, self-harm and suicide most likely to happen. Transferring between prisons has the same effect on individuals. In creating resettlement prisons, churn increased significantly and as it included 18-21-year-olds the age profile became younger within these establishments. Furthermore, due to supervision of previously unsupervised under-12-month-sentenced offenders, the level of recall to prison increased creating a further churn previously not seen. In essence, a policy decision was implemented which contributed

to the downward spiral of instability, although other factors came along which created the perfect storm.

Prison competition came to a halt during Chris Grayling's tenure. Public sector bids during this process showed that NOMS believed they could run safe, secure, and decent prisons far more competitively, so competition was stopped. A policy decision was made to benchmark all public sector prisons massively reducing cost per prisoner place with the savings being delivered virtually immediately, unlike contracted prisons whose savings tended to be at the back end of long contracts. A sword of Damocles was waved over our heads, saying this is the only way forward to stave off privatisation and it must be done. This was very palatable to Government who needed to cut spending across the public sector. The much maligned - and justifiably so - prison benchmarking began; the race to the bottom was in full swing.

The decision by Chris Grayling to compete facilities management was proven to be expensive and disastrous with the prison estate worsening due to unresponsive contractors and lack of funding. A crumbling estate became so dilapidated that large parts of it were unfit for human habitation but remained in use.

Implementation of benchmarking from 2012-2017 led to a demonstrable deterioration in outcomes, particularly safety. For example, numbers of front-line operational HMPS operational staff were cut by 31% between 2010 and 2017. There was no corresponding reduction in the prison population. To reduce excess staff at speed, a voluntary early departure scheme was implemented across all grades of staff with significant take up. This resulted in prisons losing thousands of years of experience and the associated destabilising effect it created. The recruitment tap was turned off, there would be no new staff employed. Rates of assaults in prisons increased by almost 150% over this same period, with assaults of staff increasing by over 250%, self-harm incidents rising by 120% and unplanned use of force more than doubling in that time. To this day, we have not recovered from this catastrophic reduction in funding.

At around this time a new workforce strategy was implemented, called Fair and Sustainable. Its purpose: to streamline and flatten management structures, reduce the costs of pay by lowering starting salaries and the use of a job evaluation scheme to ensure fairness across pay structures and reduce equal pay claims. This coupled with reform of pensions made joining HMPS a far less attractive option even if the recruitment tap was turned back on, which it was not for another two years.

In May 2015 Michael Gove took up office. He was well known as a reformer whilst Secretary of State for Education, although his policies were divisive within that sector. Mr Gove wanted to test his academy schools model in prisons. Several establishments across England were identified and began testing 'autonomy'. Mr Gove believed that prisons could become independent legal entities. Those working in prisons knew this could never be the case. As a national service, prisons rely on each other for operational stability and resilience. These pilots received some pump priming money, but the rest of the prison estate continued with the austerity measures and levels of violence, suicide and self-harm continued to rise. When Mr Gove was replaced by Liz Truss, this ministerial priority stopped.

Liz Truss took up office in July 2016. She was the first Secretary of State during the decade who accepted prisons were in crisis and argued for extra funding for the beleaguered service. In November 2016 'Prison Safety and Reform' was published. It moved away from autonomy to empowerment of governors, once again claiming to remove bureaucracy and inefficiency (Ken Clarke promised the same in 2011 and Chris Grayling in 2013 and both failed miserably). This empowerment was seen as central to improving our prisons. We were now embarking on the reform agenda. 2,500 more prison officers were to be recruited, still far short of the 7,000 lost over the previous 3 years. Liz Truss decided to split

operational delivery from policy. She confirmed that NOMS would be replaced by HMPPS. As part of this change, the new executive agency was given full responsibility for all operations across prisons and probation, while the Ministry of Justice took the lead on commissioning services, policy development and setting standards.

The Prison Safety & Reform programme was led and predominantly run by generalist civil servants with little or no understanding of the very complex nature of prisons and their inhabitants. Like many wheels of bureaucracy, it was slow, cumbersome and unresponsive to the critical situation in prisons. It was a machine requiring information, information, and more information from an already extremely stretched prison system. The feeding of the machine was taking management teams in prisons away from the job of keeping prisons safe and decent. The added frustration for governors was that nothing seemed to come back from the MOJ to improve their jails. Rather than feeling empowered, governors were feeling under more scrutiny than ever, assurance seemed to be increasing and they were still governing prisons whilst shackled by centralised bureaucracy.

At this time the MOJ moved to a functional model for delivering corporate services. This model groups specific specialisms or professions (e.g. finance, human resources) under a head of function. The function then works with business areas that require them to deliver their services. Governors and their teams working in prisons universally hate this model. They find the service provided, particularly around finance and HR, is very poor, often with these professionals having little or no corporate knowledge of the complexities of prisons and their people. The risk remains with governors, but they struggle to manage it with such poor support. The frustration is palpable.

In 2020 'A Smarter Approach to Sentencing' White Paper was published by Robert Buckland, the then Justice Secretary. Without going into much of the detail, this paper would lead to more people in prison and more people in prison for longer, despite there being no evidence that longer sentences make any difference to public safety. The impact for prisons was more overcrowding, in an already stressed system, increasing the instability and safety concerns.

For over two years the country and prisons were in the grip of Covid. Very little has been said about how Governors and their teams managed the pandemic, but I am shouting at the top of my voice, when I tell you they were magnificent and a lesson across the entire public sector in how to manage risk, keep people safe, and save lives. Predictions were that over 3,000 prisoners would die from the virus and Government were urged by health experts to reduce the population by thousands to manage this risk. Government responded by implementing an early release scheme. It was so stringent and risk averse that in fact it released less than 30 prisoners. Governors and their teams were the hidden heroes of Covid and have never been given the recognition they deserve for what they achieved. There were 159 prisoner deaths believed to be due to Covid, plus another 56 deaths due to other causes where Covid was present. Most of these deaths were in the second wave in winter 2020 to early 2021 when we had a more deadly transmissible variant and before vaccination coverage was widespread. Government, despite public health advice and the very closed environment of a prison, refused to give prison staff or prisoners priority for the vaccine. This decision was based on what public opinion would think, as opposed what was the right thing to do to stop the spread of the virus within prisons and out into the wider community; after all, prison officers were moving daily between the two. A sinful decision in my opinion.

In 2021 Dominic Raab, Justice Secretary, introduced another White Paper: 'Prisons Strategy'. It all makes sound common sense and there is very little of the content which can be criticised, but the implementation and delivery of the paper is compromised due to the crisis prisons currently face.

As an organisation, HMPPS is dependent on the activity of other organisations including the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and HM Courts and Tribunal Service, and the policies and objectives of the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, to determine the demands on its services. HMPPS itself has limited levers to control this demand.

The prison population is expected to rise significantly during the 2020s. This is driven by a range of factors and government policy decisions including: an ongoing increase in the number of long-term sentences; the impact of continuing recruitment of 20,000 frontline police officers; and changes to sentencing driving an increase in probation caseloads and the increased demand for prison places.

In response to this increase in demand, funding was secured at SR21 to deliver 20,000 prison places by the middle of the decade. As a result, HMPPS is currently embarking on the most ambitious portfolio of prison building in over a century to ensure there are enough places to accommodate those sentenced by the courts.

However, we are in a perfect storm scenario at present. Our prisons are full and the prison building programme cannot keep pace with the increase in the prison population. For several years, the PGA has voiced concern over Government's "tough on crime" agenda and the impact on an already stressed system, which has suffered from lack of investment for well over a decade. Many of our prisons are not providing a safe, decent, and rehabilitative environment; under-invested prisons do not work to reduce re-offending and protect the public from crime.

A rigorous process was carried out in 2022 to look at the maximum number of prisoners any establishment can hold to maintain safety, decency, order and control. This risk assessed project was done by expert senior operational leaders within His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, taking into consideration the uniqueness of each prison. This maximum number is called the operational capacity and when filled, a prison is full. Currently most of our prisons are full, and we are now using police cells for the overflow. Where there are spaces, it has been in the lower category open prisons, and government policy has made it much more difficult to move prisoners into these conditions. A piece of work has been conducted to maximise the use of open prisons and these are now reaching their capacity. There is no more room at the inn.

This dangerous situation is due to reactive government policy which has failed to ensure sufficient prison places for the demand they have created. The political rhetoric, rather than being tough on crime, has created a situation where further overcrowding will turn our prisons into little more than warehouses of despair, danger, and degradation, with staff refusing to work due to their health and safety being compromised. Government is failing both the people prisons hold and community they serve.

The 'Fair & Sustainable' workforce strategy which reduced the pay and reward package for prison officers has had a long-term impact on recruitment and retention. The dangerous working environment, coupled with this, means we are far from being an employer of choice. Whilst recent pay awards from the Pay Review Body have improved the package, there has not been a resulting increase in people wanting to join the service. With the new prison officer training cut to six weeks, and the prison officer apprenticeships suspended, there is little in the way of incentive to join. The crisis in staffing, has led to a situation where large numbers are sent on detached duty (sometimes compulsory detached duty) across the country to try and shore up prisons where shortfalls are even worse. We know that staff-prisoner relationships are critical to stability, but with such a transient staffing situation, this is compromised. Austere regimes are delivered across the estate due to lack of staff numbers to safely unlock prisoners.

In summary: Prisons are a critical component of the criminal justice system, and as such their role in both punishment and rehabilitation needs to be effective in the overall aim of a system which reduces reoffending.

Since 2010, 11 justice secretaries, (one holding the post twice) and thirteen ministers (one holding the post twice) have, through political buffeting and interference, achieved nothing but decline in the function of prisons. The decision by government to impose eye-watering austerity on unprotected departments last decade resulted in a race to the bottom for many public services, from which prisons have yet to recover.

Ministry of Justice statistics over these years document record-breaking rises in violence, suicide, and self-harm. Lack of investment in prison infrastructure has resulted in crumbling prisons, both Victorian and those of more recent construction. Slashing of the pay and reward package for prison staff and failure to implement the recommendations of the Prison Service Pay Review Body resulted in a recruitment and retention situation never seen before in the service. This was all against a backdrop of no reduction in the prison population. Current vacancies are around 1400, and to manage the normal attrition of staff and fill these vacancies, 6500 prison officers need to be recruited every year. This is a gargantuan task when we are not an employer of choice.

During this period, Government published various strategies for change. This yo-yoing from one political priority to the next did nothing except destabilise prisons; none of these initiatives proved successful and indeed some were a catastrophic failure, both for prisons, public safety, and the public purse.

In 2019, the populist rhetoric from the new Government was a tough on crime agenda. 20,000 more police officers to find criminals, and 20,000 more prison spaces in which to lock them up. In 2021 a further Prisons Strategy White Paper was published, the content of which is uncontroversial but not particularly ambitious. That said, even to deliver this paper requires a functioning prison system.

Notwithstanding a pandemic impacting on the criminal justice system, a policy of locking up more people for longer and making it more difficult to be released requires a whole system approach ensuring downstream can cope with such political decisions. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

And finally: in this Government's 2019 manifesto, it pledged £3million for a Royal Commission on the Criminal Justice System, and this was endorsed and called for by the PGA last October at our annual conference. It has yet to be delivered, but we urge Government to do this.

The PGA is also involved in a piece of research by Hull University to look into the impact of the politicising of prisons and what a de-politicised prison system would look like. The PGA firmly believe that prisons need to have a long term, fully funded strategy with cross party agreement, informed by experts from different sectors on what works, and for government and ministerial priorities to stay well clear of us.

In the 1970's the prison population was around 45,000. The projections are that the prison population will reach 100,000 by 2030 at an average cost of £47,000 per prisoner per year. This is not value for money for the taxpayer as prison does not work. The public need to be educated and moved from this belief that locking up more people and for longer increases public safety. It's a lie and it is perpetuated by government rhetoric. The PGA want a firm commitment from government, that they will reduce the prison population and fund the prison system, so that we can truly rehabilitate people in our care and make our communities safer.

When we are full, we are full. There is no possibility of overcrowding further due to the health and safety implications for those living and working in prisons. The PGA wrote to the previous secretary

of state making it clear that we will take legal action if our members are ordered to do so. I know other recognised trade unions are taking the same stance. The PGA want the Government to commit to an early release scheme, as predictions are that we will be full to capacity by July, which is only six weeks away. The imperative is here right now.

The remand population is at its highest since records began at around 14,000, many of whom are released from court at the point of sentencing due to the length of time it takes for their cases to be heard. The PGA want more use of tagging for those waiting for trial to relieve some of the pressure on the system.

The PGA lobby you to change the catastrophic direction of government so we can once again have a safe, functioning prison system. Please make some noise! Thank you.

Paul Maynard MP thanked **Andrea Albutt** very much for her presentation, saying that the important thing about valedictory speeches was that you could say exactly what you thought. He knew she was being honest because she was vaguely nice about Liz Truss. He moved to questions.

Andrew Selous MP said that this had been painful to hear, although he could push back on finances, since the last time the country had run a surplus had been in 2001. As to what could be done, he had reflected on the lack of knowledge about prisons amongst the public and even amongst MPs. There was no MP scheme to find out about prisons, or much of a community link with local prisons. All in government were terrified of a Daily Mail story. Whilst finances were limited, prisons were sadly never going to be a high priority. Was there any mileage in getting the public and the MPs in? Could that change the discourse a bit?

Andrea Albutt said that people in prison were forgotten, once they had been locked up, except by those like the members of the meeting who were interested. It would be challenging to get the general public and MPs into prison, but we should get the story out that prisons that were full every single day did not work. It was a case of keeping the system running rather than rehabilitating prisoners. We locked up more people than anyone else in Europe.

Andrew Selous asked if that was because we had more crime, and whether we were a more violent country.

Lord Hogg agreed that the public did not know what was going on in prisons. He had been Prisons Minister in the 1980s, and had also been a member of an independent monitoring board (IMB). He thought the IMBs had a role to play in educating the public. Efforts should be made to get more people involved in IMBs, and to circulate their reports more widely.

Paul Maynard MP said the IMBs had been the subject of the group's previous meeting.

Lord Attlee said that Rory Stewart had set up the Prison Service parliamentary scheme, but it had been embryonic. He had been one of the guinea pigs and had spent many days in Brixton prison, where he had had conversations with prisoners and governor grades which had enabled him to understand a lot more about how a good prison worked, as well as some of their problems, such as 'potting' and Friday release. He had put forward amendments on both issues.

Andrew Selous MP asked whether the scheme was still in existence.

Lord Attlee responded that when Rory Stewart had stopped being Prisons Minister, his replacement was interested in other things. The problem of the rapid turn-over of Prisons Ministers had already been mentioned. He had proposed that Prisons Ministers should receive a four year 'sentence' so that they had enough time to implement reforms.

Lord Garnier wanted to ask about IPPs. When he had been a shadow minister he had visited around 75 prisons, YOIs and Secure Training Centres and the governors he had spoken to had told him that IPP prisoners were the most difficult cohort to look after. What was the PGA's view as to how that problem should be solved?

Andrea Albutt responded that there were still 2,000 IPP prisoners in custody. Some had been sentenced to just three or four years, and they were still in prison twenty years later. The PGA were very clear that there needed to be a review of all IPP prisoners. They needed to be given hope that they would be released at some point.

Lord Hodgson said that, to revert back to parliamentary schemes, the relatively successful ones were when some member of parliament had taken them under their wing. It was not the minister that counted, it was somebody from parliament who really wanted to do it. For example James Gray MP had made the armed forces his big work. The challenge was to find some member of either house who had the time, the effort and the resource to push this as a social and societal issue, irrespective of the minister, to form links and to provide long-term pressure and a framework for reform.

Lord Hogg agreed, and cited Leo Abse's campaign for reform of the law on homosexuality.

Lord Hodgson said they were looking for a David Ramsbotham of a different era.

Gemma Abbott from the Howard League thanked Andrea Albutt for her candour. She wondered whether there was anything more she could say about the possible legal action she had mentioned.

Andrea Albutt said she hoped they would not have to go down that road. But they had sought legal advice and she thought that, under health and safety legislation, you could not put more people in a prison that had been operationally assessed as being able to hold x. You would be creating an incredibly dangerous environment. She thought in that case that they would win.

Ben Leapman from Inside Time wanted to ask a question along the same lines. Every month the MoJ published the statistics on prison numbers and they kept going up, as did the statistics on capacity. Did the fact that prison governors had not taken action as yet mean that they considered these increases safe?

Andrea Albutt responded that some of the increases in capacity were about the rapid deployment units that had been put into prisons, some would have meant more accommodation, that had been closed for refurbishment, were coming back on line. If PGA members were ordered to take increased numbers above their operational capacity, then they would take legal action. But that had not happened to date. They had made the previous Secretary of State aware.

Danny Barrs noted that since these were 'His Majesty's prisons' it should be possible to make the King aware of what was happening in his name, such as requiring two adults to share a cell with a toilet. Could he be asked to withdraw his name from this disgusting situation?

Andrea Albutt said that was not for her to answer.

Lord Atlee said that it was up to parliamentarians to hold the government to account. He agreed that we incarcerated far too many people for far too long. He agreed with everything the speaker had said.

Danny Barrs said that parliamentarians had to find a way of bringing this to public attention, which they were not doing.

Lord Hogg said they had to get local press involved and members of the public into prisons.

Andrea Albutt said that alternatively the Government could tell the public how things really were. They had to take a different direction, and be brave enough to do that.

Lord Atlee said that he had made proposals for drastic reform in respect of prolific minor offenders, but no-one was interested. We were incarcerating about 12,000 people from the ages of about 18 to 24 and we did nothing with them.

Lord Hogg said that James Timpson was doing a marvellous job in helping prisoners to gain employment on release and it would be helpful if governors tried to get more local employers involved.

Andrea Albutt said that governors did that already, but that in many reception prisons it was very difficult. She also wanted to reemphasise that in a prison system that was full every single day, where the main task was to try to find prison places, governors' number one priority was to maximise the use of their prisons. That took them away from doing the quality liaison work in the community that they really wanted to do. Day in, day out they were trying to find spaces for prisoners.

Danny Shaw noted that there were two crises as regards numbers, one immediate and another coming down the tracks. As regards the immediate one, Andrea Albutt had said there would be no spaces left in six weeks. Could she expand on that, and what measures needed to be taken?

Andrea Albutt said that originally the estimated date had been October but that had been brought forward. Even since last week, the number had gone but by 200 odd. The prison building programme would help, but it was not keeping pace with the rise in the population. The open estate, where there was usually some room, was at 97% capacity. Police cells were in use, and more would be included under Operation Safeguard. They were fuller in the north of the country than in the south. From the PGA perspective the only thing that could improve matters was some kind of early release scheme. Government had to be brave: the day would come when there would be no room to put anybody.

Danny Shaw asked whether anybody was listening.

Andrea Albutt said she did not know what view Alex Chalk, the new Secretary of State, would take.

John Plummer said that John Major had recently spoken to the Prison Reform Trust, and he had said that when he was Secretary of State he had been extremely shocked when the population went up to 40,000. There had been some publicity for that speech, and he hoped that today's speech could be circulated more widely to obtain some media attention.

Paul Maynard asked the speaker if that could be done, and she agreed.

Richard Garside asked about the utilisation of open prisons.

Andrea Albutt reiterated that they were at 97% capacity and so they were effectively full too.

Pia Sinha said that as a former prison governor the speech had spoken to her experience. She noted that Michael Spurr, a previous Director General of the Prison Service, had said that part of the problem was that prison governors were very compliant: when things were going wrong they would just make it work. Much had been said recently about activist civil servants. She had not seen any evidence, but did the speaker think they should be? Would that have an impact?

Andrea Albutt said that she thought that would be great, but that there would be consequences. That was not the way they were expected to behave. She was ok because she was a trade union leader so she could say what she liked. If there could be a cultural change so that people felt safe to

say how it really was, that would be brilliant. But governors were always quite quiet: they suffered in silence.

Paul Maynard MP said that the right minister always liked to hear the unvarnished truth. It was about how you spoke truth to power, not whether you should.

Juliet Lyon said that when Douglas Hurd had been Home Secretary he had used executive release and there had not been any public outcry nor a rise in crime. The young prisoner (under 18s) population had gone down by at least 70%, without a rise in juvenile crime. It was important that people knew these things. Judges and magistrates needed to be asked to attend prisons to see for themselves how rehabilitation was impossible in those conditions. They should seriously consider using community sentences, with drug, alcohol and mental health treatment requirements. There should be a requirement on senior health officials to go into prisons to see for themselves what was happening to people who are mentally ill. There were things that could be done: we should not just wring our hands. There were some good and practical solutions. All power to the PGA for saying there was a red line which could not be crossed.

Lord Hogg said there should be a practice direction for judges to go round their local prisons as a matter of routine.

Lord Atlee said that when he had visited the Old Bailey he had had senior judges complaining to him that they hated having to sentence young 15-year-old boys for murder to another 15 years in prison. They knew it would do no good but they had to adhere to the sentencing guidelines. He suggested that a duty should be put on the Sentencing Guidelines Council to adjust sentencing so that the prison population did not get too close to capacity. Parliamentarians and those in government were ratcheting up sentences so that they were becoming longer and longer. The Offender Management Unit in the MoJ could calculate what every change in legislation made to the prison population.

Tier Blundell wanted to ask for the speaker's thoughts on the parole situation, in the light of a recent case where a man found not guilty last July was still in prison because his parole meeting had been cancelled.

Andrea Albutt responded that she could not comment because this was not her area of expertise. However the Government had committed to a Royal Commission on criminal justice in its last manifesto and this had still not been delivered. It was essential because all parts of the criminal justice system needed to work effectively.

Paul Maynard MP commented that Royal Commissions were what governments promised when they had no better ideas in mind. They were the last refuge of the terminally ignorant, in his view. It had been 13 years since Juliet Lyon had approached him as a newly elected MP. His first debate had been on youth justice. The arguments for penal reform had been overwhelming. Ken Clarke was a decent, principled, honourable man and the new government was going to enter the sunlit uplands of prison reform. Here we were, 11 Secretaries of State and 13 prisons ministers later, and he was so frustrated. He agreed with everything the speaker had said. He had read the White Paper on Sentencing that never was, as he had been in the MoJ at the time as a minister. The lesson he would draw from the evening's meeting was about missed opportunities. There were narrow windows where positive change could occur, but if the political wind was not blowing in the right direction those windows could rapidly close. Alex Chalk, the new Secretary of State, was a good man. They could be quite rare in politics. His heart was genuinely in the right place. Whether that meant he was in the right place at the right time to do what he knew to be right was another matter entirely.

Lord Atlee suggested he may have run out of time, since the time to do prison reform was after a successful general election.

Paul Maynard MP said that things could still get done. He hoped that Alex Chalk could be invited to address the All Party Group in the future. On that note he wanted to thank Andrea Albutt for her presentation, which he had found fascinating. He thanked everyone for coming. The next meeting would be with James Timpson, talking about prison employment boards, on 21st June.