

Pete White
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Positive Prison? Positive Futures...

From Prison to Parliament: Bringing Dark Experience to Light

In this seminar, Pete White, founder and Director of *Positive Prison: Positive Futures?* drew on his own experiences of incarceration and personal transformation to raise important questions about the role of prisons and the criminal justice system more broadly in the rehabilitation and reintegration people with convictions back into society. His talk took the form of personal narrative highlighting how for him, the experience of prison included elements which were a foundation for a positive reintegration into society and work at the end of his sentence. Key moments revealed the transformative potential of experiences in prison. However, his experience when compared with many of peers in HMP Edinburgh also highlighted how his relative privilege (being educated, literate and a former professional) afforded him advantages in navigating and making best use of the limited opportunities available. Data showing that the imprisoned population disproportionately comprise individuals from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage highlights how our current system of punishment raises issues of *social* as well criminal justice.

Perhaps a first for a speaker in the GCPH Seminar Series, Pete was using PowerPoint for the first time. He also confessed it was the first time he had spoken to an audience having advertised in advance the parameters of his talk. He began by relating the experience of his conviction for embezzlement and hearing the words '*gentlemen, take him down*' after having been assured by his legal team that community-based sentence was the most likely outcome. From this point he '*started on his journey into shame and darkness*'. Pete described going into a prison as a humiliating experience and further believes it is intended to be so. However, his talk

and work are not intended as a complaint against the current prison system but about looking for positive change and different ways forward grounded in the experiences of people who have experienced incarceration.

A defining moment on his road to rehabilitation came early in his sentence. Pete visited the library to find a book with pictures which could serve as inspiration for his art class (agreeing to attend an educational course and being available for random drug tests were a condition of serving time in enhanced accommodation). The head librarian, on learning Pete was jailed for embezzlement, recognised him as someone literate and numerate and offered him a job in the library. In this role, Pete was able to enjoy the camaraderie and 'prison humour' of the library team; Craig, Harry and Norrie.

From here, Pete trained as a literacy and numeracy tutor. On release he would be unable to return to his career as an architect having been struck off as a consequence of his conviction. Working as a tutor gave him an opportunity to imagine a life and work on the outside. It also enabled him to work in every part of the prison, meet and learn about the lives of his peers inside. He recalls:

“And I met some fascinating people. But the interesting thing about it was that prison was full of people. Nearly everybody I met was somebody who’d had a pretty tough life before they got to prison, and for whom many found it to be one of the safest, most comfortable places they had ever been.”

Becoming known as someone who could read and write led to people coming to his door with letters they'd received *‘from lawyers and loves, but not usually in the same envelope’*. He would help them read their mail and from there ask that they tell him something about how they got to prison. He found a personal quality in his ability to connect with inmates from across the prison and many came to him for guidance and advice. He left prison in January 2006 intent on being helpful.

“I’d found that by being helpful with people, listening to their stories, hearing what they had to say and then sharing with them what was inside the letter meant that instead of being an architect, something like a professional, I could just be me, because I could read and write, listen and talk.”

After prison, Pete volunteered for a service for people coming through and out of the prison system where he helped people with reading and writing and storytelling about their lives. He then got a part-time job as a development officer on a community farm and made his first funding application two years after being released. Soon, the Robertson Trust asked him for a meeting where he felt it relevant to disclose his conviction. In response he was asked *“the most open, gentle, non-judgemental question you can ask someone with a conviction: ‘How was your time inside?’”* Pete urged the audience to ask this question if we are ever unsure what to ask a person with convictions upon meeting them for the first time.

The Robertson Trust supported Pete’s idea of forming an organisation made up of people who’d been through the prison system and had rebuilt their lives effectively to do something to help other people do the same. By September 2012, having gained a constitution and supported a Scottish Government review of the reducing reoffending programme through allowing people with convictions’ voices to be heard, Pete’s charity was formed.

The second half of Pete’s seminar focused on statistics that highlight the scale of the imprisoned population and the unequal distribution of convictions across Scottish society. He also focused on what can be done to improve the experience of prison so that better lives can be led upon release. Early gains for his charity included the identification of Friday releases as problematic due to services being unavailable over the weekend and prisoners in Scotland being unable to open bank accounts prior to release. Pete found he was able to make progress with such issues through a willingness to talk directly to people who have the power to make change with clear and actionable recommendations (asking the Justice Secretary to allow Friday

releases to be moved forward and the Royal Bank of Scotland to support people approaching the end of sentences to have bank accounts).

He highlighted areas that require further progress and involve all of us supporting the idea that prison should not be about punishment, particularly if we are concerned by how prison perpetuates inequality. Such areas include:

- building on the widely held acceptance that short sentences are ineffective in reducing reoffending and that community sentences should become a default option. Our society should only use custody for issues of public safety, not punishment.
- for people with convictions to be recognised as citizens. This requires supporting the idea of reintegration and rehabilitation of people who have finished their sentences. This involves not using terms such as 'ex-prisoner' or 'ex-offender' but to use 'people with convictions'. Services and employers should not discriminate against people who have convictions once their sentences have been served.

Pete's talk was not only powerful, moving an audience many of whom were new to the seminar series, but also highlighted in practical terms how people's experiences can be utilised to develop recommendations to improve services and outcomes.

Summarised by Pete Seaman
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