

Thinking About Prison Abolition

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<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/21/how-nottingham-prison-descended-into-chaos-staff-cuts-austerity-violence>

This recent “long read” in *The Guardian* – an analysis of the “hellhole” that HMP Nottingham became during the years of austerity - is depressing but worth pondering in our ever-renewing quest, as Quakers, to discern where we should stand on the prison question. The article treats Nottingham as emblematic of the whole of the prison system in England and Wales and ought to help us see, in a new light, the current government’s reprehensible plans to build some shiny new, “smart” prisons and expand daily prisoner numbers from its present 80,500 to 98,500 by 2026, an astonishing 24% increase.

It makes the dismally familiar point that whilst repeated warnings were issued by the Prison Inspectorate (and others), about the deteriorating state of prisons, the loss of experienced officers and the increasing rates of violence and self-harm on the wings, these were *deliberately* ignored by successive governments. It reaffirms the oft-made observation that whatever harmful things the prisoners have done to ‘warrant’ a custodial sentence, whatever victims they themselves have created, most of them are poor and psychologically damaged, if not actually mentally ill (though many, as we know, are indeed that).

The article documents terrible violence done to young, inexperienced officers by prisoners – and vice-versa, racist violence done to Black and Asian prisoners by white officers. It makes it abundantly clear that violence, from all directions, becomes endemic in underfunded, understaffed and badly managed prisons. HMP Nottingham was demonstrably not a place where decency thrived – as one decent officer, whose story is recounted in the article, found to her cost.

The article gives one encouraging instance of a seriously addicted prisoner who asked a counsellor for help, got it, and seems genuinely to have turned their life round. This is the kind of story that too many Quakers, in my experience, still latch on to as proof that, despite everything, some good can be done even in the grimmest of circumstances (true!) - *and that if only there was more systematic activity like this*, prisons would be acceptable places (untrue!). Of course small acts of kindness always matter - Quakers will never demur on this - but to claim them as “growth points”, signs of incipient redemption in a relentlessly violent institution, indications that an older, kinder regime could, with effort, be restored, is to seriously misunderstand the penal state we are in.

On the scale that England and Wales now plans to use imprisonment, systematic rehabilitation isn’t possible. The resources will never be there – and nor should they be. It would take £millions, maybe even a £billion or two, or more, to make our expanding prison estate rehabilitative, and against the politically competing claims of education, healthcare and poverty-reduction budgets, that kind of expenditure would surely not, to principled and pennywise Quakers, be an ethical use of public money - and even less of corporate/private money - when we know there are so many more viable, lower cost alternatives.

A Conservative government White Paper in 1988, – yes 1988, when the daily prison population was just below 40,000 – treated as an axiom the view that “Imprisonment is all

too often an expensive way of making bad people worse” and made it the cornerstone of its (foreseeably short-lived!) “penal reduction” strategy. Under a banal new mantra of “prison works”, prisoner numbers began rising in 1993, peaked and plateaued, occasionally fell a little, finally arriving at their present levels.

Whether British Quakers have ever really made the effort to properly understand the dynamics of prison expansion, to connect it to increasing social inequality and the collapse of social welfare, is an open, interesting, question, beyond my scope here. But in the face of almost forty years’ worth of failure to shrink the prison estate, to normalise rehabilitation, and to create sustainable community alternatives, is it not perverse to think that “making prisons better” in England and Wales should remain the touchstone of Friends’ moral investment in penal debate, or even to think that it constitutes a realistic and feasible way forward?

Say what you like about “penal abolition”, it at least knows how to draw a line in the sand. Some things are just wrong to do, wrong to continue doing, wrong to collude with. Quakers – correct me if I’m wrong – don’t countenance so-called “*necessary evils*”, or the practice of repaying evil with evil. That part (if not all parts) of what the *Six Quakers* said in 1979 is quite true. Sure, some versions of penal abolitionism are silly and extreme – it’s a spectrum of positions – but the heart of it, I now think, is closer to what love, truth and justice require of us as Friends, however unfashionable or “unrealistic” the task might seem.

American Quaker, Fay Honey Knopp, implicitly understood that in her co-authored handbook *Instead of Prison* in 1976. Her pragmatic version of abolition influenced the Canadian Quakers to adopt an abolitionist stance in 1981, and is still a good *starting point* for thinking about this. (It is perhaps no longer entirely sufficient, because times and circumstances have changed - inequality has deepened, political cultures have polarised, and “smart” surveillance technologies are becoming pervasive in criminal justice, which requires some rethinking). Like Fay Knopp, I doubt we could ever *fully* abolish imprisonment, or even, contra the *Six Quakers*, fully abolish punishment, but we have defensible grounds for making the attempt.

My abolitionism has some ‘go-as-far-as-you-can’ practical limits, but I can easily envisage ways of creating more socially just societies, better ways of dealing with harmful behaviour (especially, but not only, if mental illness lies at its root), better ways of helping traumatised crime victims (and traumatised offenders), in sanctuaries), and better ways of creating safe public spaces (especially, say, for women). Prototypes of all this already exist and are arguably more plausible “growth points”, however faltering, however marginal, than wistfully reading more than is warranted into chance acts of kindness in dysfunctional prisons, thankful as we should always be for them.

“Penal Abolition” is not realistic, you may say? Quite so, it isn’t. None of the abolitions that Quakers have historically involved themselves in (always alongside likeminded others) seemed realistic at the time they embarked on them. Not the abolition of capital punishment, not the abolition of slavery. They went deeply against the grain of their societies. Both slavery and the death penalty were sanctioned by Divine Command, intractable, given, impossible to imagine otherwise... until the moment they weren’t and new possibilities opened up. Demands for their abolition understandably roused hostility and invited derision, and not all Quakers were up for the struggle: many initially believed slavery was acceptable if slaves were treated with kindness.

The actual processes of change were iterative and cross-generational – no-one knew in advance for how long a witness would be needed: the important thing was to uphold it. Crucially, what happened *after* these abolitions in the jurisdictions where they occurred wasn't perfect – better in some respects than what went before - but not without new problems and dangers of their own. So it might prove with the abolition of imprisonment, but that is not a reason for inertia now. Abolitionism (of the best kind) is arguably rooted in nonviolence, a philosophy familiar to most Quakers, and is about *saying no* – enough is enough – to violent and degrading institutions. It is infused with hope, but it is not about the creation of utopias. It should not be judged - or dismissed - as such.

Furthermore, no two abolitions can be expected to be alike – outside the USA (from where a lot of modern abolitionist writing comes), slavery and even capital punishment are not exactly analogous to prisons: they serve different institutional purposes, so the strategies and tactics of abolition, and their eventual outcomes, won't take the same forms. What they do all have in common is “ethical absolutism” – a sense that *this thing* is morally untenable, even evil, and must be ended – the same stance that the peace testimony enjoins us to take in respect of war (however unrealistic that objective seems).

Agreed, “prison abolition” is a hard call to make in open public debate, when the idea can be simplified, caricatured and mocked out of existence on social media. There is no point giving easy ammunition to one's critics by saying foolish and shallow things. Whilst advocating abolition, and trying to reframe penal questions in terms of social and community justice, we cannot sound as though we think crime does not exist, or isn't serious, or that there are no real harms to be dealt with, or that some of the practical issues aren't undeniably thorny.

Crime can blight poor communities, just as surely as illegal (or even legal) tax havens deplete the public purse and undermine the common good, but as an institutional response to them prison remains an expensive way of making bad people, and bad situations, worse – to be foregone. Finding the words / stories / narratives to make abolition plausible is part of what is required to make abolition happen, just as it was with slavery and capital punishment. Creating the moment when abolition comes to seem like the better option, morally and practically - a thing that can be feasibly worked towards, no matter the time it takes - cannot be done without talk, argument and action, however forlorn the attempt might initially seem. If not us Quakers, who? If not now, when?

We can only start from here, however inauspicious “here” looks. Whether we need always declare ourselves “abolitionists” in public is, in some respects, moot, and depends somewhat on the audience and our immediate purpose in a particular setting. Nonetheless, I cannot imagine that any discerning appraisal of Quaker traditions and testimonies, (especially to truth, in all its dimensions), could lead us, in Britain today, to be other than “abolitionists *of the heart*”, at the very least. Like the Canadian Quakers have been since 1981. Some of us here already are. Maybe more than we know.