

Pen(ology) Pals: Connected Through Conversation

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We were invited to write this piece to present an example of how academics and people in prison can think collaboratively about matters concerning criminal justice practices and experiences. Collaborating in this way creates opportunities to make sense of issues both parties are motivated to understand in more depth. It is our hope that this written piece expresses the value of continued dialogue between prisons and the outside world and the importance of engaging in ongoing conversation.

Despite our distinct differences in life experiences, shared interests have formed the basis of the authors' relationship which is grounded in dialogue, facilitates positive focus, and promotes the view that prisons and the people within them can still be part of our communities through meaningful reflection on lived experience. In preparation for writing this article, we considered the issues we would like to address and how to communicate our points of discussion. Keen to develop a unique approach to our writing process, our methodological design for this piece has been to write the article as a series of letters to reflect our ongoing method of continued communication since 2016.

Rather than presenting extracts of our existing communications, the original letters contained in this article have been written purposely. They are based on collaboratively selected topics which have resurfaced at various points in our previous conversations. Readers will note that references are cited in some of the featured letters, and this is not uncommon in our regular interactions. Providing references in our usual conversations (outside of this article) signposts to articles and reports we have read and, in some cases, leads to the sharing of those sources via post for continued discussion. For this article, some additional references have been provided to support our dialogue. We discussed several topics that we could potentially address in this article, eventually resulting in a set of three themes which are considered through a deliberately conversational approach: *Treading Water Behind the Scenes, Coping and Hope and Considering International Comparisons.*

Each theme is presented through a series of reciprocal letters providing discussion on some pressing issues relevant to penological thought. Within the letters exchanged between the authors, further themes emerge organically, including public perceptions of prisons and those who live and work within them. What follows in this written piece is a 'live' conversation enabling readers to understand how written dialogue between an academic and a serving prisoner facilitates the emergence of such themes and leads to important exchanges of experience, personal reflection and scholarly work.

Becoming 'Pen(ology) Pals'

We have been thinking collaboratively about when we first met in 2016. Glenn was held in HMP Full Sutton and Helen, along with Dr Bill Davies,¹ was looking for men to take part in a Learning Together programme which involved the accredited study of a third-year university penology module. Glenn was 9 years into his life sentence and had been given the opportunity to study alongside university students, which was something he didn't want to miss. Helen had recently completed her PhD researching adult male prisoners' experiences of education, and through the development of this programme, it was a chance to put some of her research findings into practice. This meant going into prison as an educator to extend the reach of higher education and be part of a learning experience that revealed the power of education in bringing people together for meaningful interactions, grounded in a shared interest in learning, reading and critical discussion. This kind of learning has been experienced by many university students and people serving prison sentences nationally and internationally, championing the value of educational experiences in breaking down social and physical divides.

For Glenn, the course inspired him to continue with his own studies, which he has done since. Through the penology module, Glenn was able to reflect on his sentence as a whole drawing on concepts such as 'intelligent trust' to explore the

1. At this time, both Helen and Bill worked as Senior Lecturers at Leeds Beckett University.

experience and stages of long-term imprisonment.² Concepts such as this, which significantly resonated with Glenn, ignited what has now become a passion; understanding and speaking out for truth and change within the criminal justice system. Penological issues have become the foundation of our continued communication. For Helen, the circumstances of the authors' first meeting, through a shared educational experience, was also transformative. While researching education in prisons was an important learning process, this experience facilitated personal and professional growth through interpersonal interaction and resulted in the development of a more in-depth appreciation of the value of emotional intelligence and intellectual humility. Transitioning from tutor and student to now 'pen(ology) pals' who regularly correspond has been an important journey for both authors. For Glenn, it has facilitated support and encouragement in his academic progression and for Helen, it has provided an opportunity to remain connected to a former student (and now collaborator) through a relationship grounded in a shared enthusiasm for education, and a connection to the realities of prison life. Through our letter writing we connect the prison to wider society and together explore various subjects that we both find interesting and relevant to talk about.

From 2017 to 2021, following meeting via the Learning Together programme in 2016, we maintained contact through physical letter writing, the 'old school' way, with paper, envelopes, and stamps. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed this down for us and in 2021 we decided to try using the online *emailaprisoner.com* (EMAP) system, which has now become our preferred way of writing. Writing letters takes time and thinking, and this is something we have both enjoyed over the years. This written piece has been co-produced through EMAP correspondence only. Achieving a co-authored piece in this way demonstrates the product of a flattened hierarchy between the authors in the spirit of intellectual fellowship.

Treading Water Behind the Scenes

In this section, we consider two key issues. Firstly, we discuss public perceptions of prisons and people within them and how misrepresentations can be problematic. We also consider how some people in prison who have completed a range of offending behaviour, risk reduction and educational programmes can be left feeling forgotten in the system due to barriers to opportunities for higher level education.

Dear Helen,

I am a firm believer that there should be a wide-reaching public consultation about the future of prisons. The public, as I did before I came to prison, have a very misinformed view of what the purpose of prison is, and what prison life is actually like. The public only see sensationalised documentaries or dramas which show mainly violence. This is clearly what the government of the day want the image to be, as being seen to be 'tough on crime' and that punishment is a vote winner. The truth is of course very different, as within the walls of the prison lots of good work takes place and many men and women really do change their lives.

However, the accepted culture of fear, intimidation, bullying and criminal activity by both staff and prisoners is widespread, with security staff and law enforcement only able to scratch the surface of what is really going on in our prisons. In my opinion, until the truth about our prison system is made public and an informed consultation is held, we will continue to see many men and women simply return to custody time and time again. As a lifer I look with envy at the Canadian, Dutch and Portuguese systems which have given opportunities for release at different stages of the life sentence.

I, like many of my peers, have completed all offender behaviour and risk reduction work and we are now just treading water, waiting for release. Some of my peers describe the feeling of being forgotten by the system. Once you have completed offender behaviour and risk reduction courses, the prison has little to offer. Many workshops provide menial work that is not skilled, education provision is poor with many courses only available up to Level 2, and ROTL, which would allow us to attend real work for real wages or provide voluntary community work, is not available to lifers until the last three years of the tariff.

*I hope to hear from you soon,
Take care,
Glenn.*

2. O'Neill, B. O. (2006). Intelligent trust, small print and good communication: 150th anniversary lecture to the faculty of actuaries. *British Actuarial Journal*, 12(2), 417-430.

Dear Glenn,

I think it's interesting that you've raised the point about the disconnect between the public and the reality of prison life. It makes me think about Jamie Bennett's article, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: The Media in Prison Films'.³ In this article he talks about the importance of the role of films and the media in informing beliefs and actions and how representations of prisons depict the academic literature while at the same time distorting the reality, and that through understanding these distortions, we can then understand public attitudes to punishment. He explains the mixed reactions of the public to different depictions, from attitudes pushing towards reform to those that are more negative. I found it interesting recently to see the responses to the BBC drama 'Time'. While there were some reviews identifying flaws, many former prisoners and prison officers have credited the drama's accuracy with one reviewer saying 'I pray that Time has helped to finally awaken the public to what prison is really like. I hope it goes some way in changing the narrative of how prison is portrayed and encourages understanding of the real pain it brings'.⁴ In this review, Crilly wrote about some of the realities that you have mentioned such as fear and intimidation, and also the very worrying reality of the mental health illnesses of many people in prison. It's strange to think at the same time, as we've experienced together, lots of good work takes place in these challenging environments and as you have said, many men and women really do change their lives.

I've recently been reading through the new Prisons Strategy White Paper⁵ — not quite finished(!), and of course as you would predict, I started by searching through the new plans for education in prisons while at the same time thinking about yours and others' experiences of the limits on what is available and how this perhaps exacerbates the feeling of 'treading water' or 'swimming with the tide'⁶ and waiting — I see the tidal

metaphors are still useful to you years after the Long Term Imprisonment lecture(!). The White Paper discusses plans for a new Prisoner Education Strategy, acknowledging that education provision is 'not good enough'. The new strategy continues to focus on 'baseline skills' in literacy and numeracy and vocational qualifications in areas such as construction and computing, and I wonder where this then leaves those like yourself and your peers who are keen to continue pushing beyond Level 2. Although I think we both appreciate the importance of basic skills, we also are very conscious of the value of continued education opportunities, not just for educational qualifications that enhance employability, but also because the reach of these experiences extends to coping, wellbeing and 'feeling human' during a prison sentence, which is an important part of maintaining a safe environment for prisoners and staff⁷.

This gets me thinking about our discussions over the years about how studying has been a good way to take your mind out of prison, but that feelings of hope can fluctuate over time. Coincidentally, while I am writing this, I am listening to a recent presentation given by Drs Serena Wright and Susie Hulley about their research on life sentenced prisoners, and hope is such a distinct theme that comes through from lifers' narratives in their work. Do you think studying has been the main source of hope for you over the years, or have you found it in other ways as well?

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.
Take care,
Helen

Coping and Hope

Coping with the experience of imprisonment has been a consistent point of discussion in our written conversations over the years. In this section, we discuss the experience of entry shock, the positive influence that people who work in prisons can have, and mechanisms of coping that can lead to the development of hope for the future.

3. Bennett, J. (2006). The good, the bad and the ugly: The media in prison films. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(2), 97-115.
4. Crilly, J. (2021, June 22). BBC's drama time took me back to being inside – I hope it showed the public how painful prison is. I (Newspaper).
5. Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Prisons strategy white paper*. Ministry of Justice.
6. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the tide: Adapting to long-term imprisonment. *Justice Quarterly*, 34(3), 517-541.
7. Nichols, H. (2021). *Understanding the educational experiences of imprisoned men: (Re)education*. Routledge.

Dear Helen,

Your letter got me thinking about hope and what it means to me. In the early years of my sentence, I didn't have any hope. I had spent two years on remand before being found guilty. I recall returning from the Old Bailey having just been told I would serve at least 25 years in prison. At the time I felt I was coping well and a reception officer at HMP Belmarsh asked me if I was ok. In reply I said I was fine, and I recall saying 25 years is not that bad. I went to my cell that night and after the door was slammed shut behind me, I fell to the floor and broke down. On reflection, the time on remand and the first year following sentencing was a period of shock, dealing with the reality of spending a significant time in prison. So at that point I would say I didn't have hope.

Around a year after being sentenced, a prison officer took me to a quiet room for a coffee and a chat. I didn't realise it at the time, but this would be a life changing conversation. He spent time talking to me like I was a human, not a convicted criminal. He explained to me that I should try and focus on today and he encouraged me to become a Samaritans Listener and to engage in education. He went on to say that hope is something that I must find as it will give me the strength to get through my sentence, and we spoke about the different stages of the life sentence, something that I recall we covered in the Learning Together course. That conversation changed my life and gave me hope for the future. I did become a Listener and began to complete many courses offered by prison education. As I suggested in my previous letter, education provision is quite poor for those, like myself, who want to study beyond Level 2. I did manage to enrol with the Open University in 2011 and have since gained a Certificate in Higher Education (Open), a Certificate in Legal Studies and I am in my final year of a Business Management (Hons) Degree. I hope to then study a Masters followed by a PhD. Higher education has given me hope! I have plans for self-employment that would not have been a reality without having completed higher education and I have met people, including

you Helen, who have provided support, guidance and created opportunities that have made me feel like a human again. I now have lots of hope for the future and I am using my time left in custody to develop plans and research ideas.

It would be wrong of me if I didn't consider the many men and women who would describe having no hope. Prison can be a very lonely place, and many find it difficult to cope. My work as a Samaritans Listener opened my eyes to the mental health crisis in our prisons, with many men and women turning to self-harm as the only coping mechanism. At times I became the focus of hope for the men that I was supporting as a Listener and I would spend hours talking to peers about serious issues, or at times it was just mundane chat, but this made them feel listened to which in turn ignited some feeling of normality and hope. Sadly, the prison service is not always good at recognising and dealing with mental health issues, with many of my peers left to just suffer in silence which can result in devastating consequences.

Hope means many things to different people, but for me hope is the future I am building for myself, without which I would struggle to survive each day.

I hope you are keeping well,
Take care,
Glenn.

Dear Glenn,

Your recollection of returning from court and the impact that the realisation of your sentence had on you really resonates with Wright, Crewe and Hulley's research on very long sentences. I know you're familiar with some of their work, however I'm not sure if you've read their 2017 article 'Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences'?⁸ In this article they discuss 'entry shock', explaining that the interviews they conducted were dominated by 'Narratives of numbness and shock, and themes of darkness, illusion and hopelessness' (p.231). Interestingly, they found in their research that numbness and

8. Wright, S., Crewe, B., & Hulley, S. (2017). Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences. *Theoretical Criminology*, 21(2), 225-246.

dissociation were experienced by women and those who admitted guilt in a comparatively more intensive way. They also talk about people in or recalling early phases of their sentence, describing the difficulty in coming to terms with the sentence length as 'temporal vertigo'. I know you're interested in the metaphors and descriptions used to capture the long-term prison sentence experience, so if you'd like to read this article, let me know and I'll post you a copy — another one for your ever-expanding reading list.

In my own research and wider conversations with people in prison and people released from prison, I've heard many times about the 'one officer' who connected with them and provided advice and encouragement, and how this had a lasting positive impact, like your experience. In a module I teach at university, the students are in fact this week learning about prison officers as part of the 'populations in prison' part of the module. In one of the set readings, Arnold recalls from her doctoral research findings that the 'best' prison officers have probity (honesty and integrity), moral values and reasoning, equanimity and composure, self-confidence and assuredness.⁹ She notes that there are various ways of being a good officer which can vary based on working style. Giving the example of officers on residential wings, Arnold identifies that some 'may have a tendency towards a counselling role, based on a working style involving compassion and care' (p.273) while others may gravitate towards facilitator or rule enforcement roles. In my PhD research, former prisoners also told me about officers, like the officer who supported you, who had encouraged them to engage with education during their sentence and how this was an instigator for the eventual reimagining of a future self, drawing parallels with your own experience of developing hope for the future and how encouragement and support to engage with education has been integral to this.

As we have talked about over the years, I know that you have continued to focus on your interest in penal reform and have drawn inspiration from other countries to explore

your thoughts around this, particularly in relation to people serving life sentences. I wonder now how you view the difference between regimes in England and Wales compared to international approaches and whether you think there are approaches that may alleviate some of the challenges of 'treading water' that you have often referred to. Education, and encouragement to study, has clearly been an important mechanism for you in managing this experience. In terms of the future, are there international examples that you have identified that you think could better facilitate continued education and the realisation of hope for the future, post-release?

Take care and speak to you soon,

Helen

Considering International Comparisons

When we discussed the potential themes for discussion in this paper, Glenn noted his interest in international systems of justice that had resulted in his consideration of progression for people serving indeterminate sentences. This part of the article reflects this interest through a conversation about the Canadian 'faint hope clause' which led us to thinking again about the position and role of public opinion.

Dear Helen,

Reading your letter made me realise that I am not alone with the feelings I had when I was given my long sentence. I would like to read the article noted in your first paragraph, could you send me a copy in the mail please?

You are correct that my interest is in penal reform and the more I learn, the more passionate I become. I have, as you know, been looking at other countries and how the regime and progression for people serving indeterminate sentences differs to that of England and Wales. In 2016 the Howard League for Penal Reform completed some research. At the time there were 11,675 people serving an indeterminate sentence which was a staggering increase from 4,530 in 2001 and 2,708 in 1991.¹⁰ Looking at

9. Arnold, H. (2016). The prison officer. In Y. Jewkes, B. Crewe & J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook on Prisons*. Routledge.

10. Butt, E. (2016) *Faint hope: What to do about long sentences*. The Howard League for Penal Reform.

other countries we can learn some important lessons. The Canadian, Dutch, and Portuguese systems have each offered the potential for release at several stages of the sentence. Multiple opportunities for release are linked to a much greater recognition that steps should be taken to prevent somebody being in prison longer than necessary. I think this comes back to a point I raised in an earlier letter about public perception and understanding the purpose of prisons. Victims should always be at the heart of any decision for early release or for reform of the current system.

Canada has what is colloquially known as the 'faint hope clause', which allows those sentenced to life with a minimum of 15 years to apply to have a jury examine the progress they have made in prison and review parole eligibility. Theoretically, any person serving life with a minimum of 15 years can apply for a jury to consider their case. The jury has the power to reduce the number of years before parole eligibility and the decision must be unanimous.

In England and Wales, the Secretary of State for Justice does have executive powers, under the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, to reduce the tariff of a lifer, but the criteria for such an application is very limited and so this power is not used very often.

Looking my own circumstances, I have completed a significant part of my tariff, but I am still a number of years from pre-tariff (Cat -D) parole. My own rehabilitation is on hold because I have completed all identified risk reduction work and I am in the final stages of my degree. I am simply serving time with no benefit to my rehabilitation. As you know, I am keen to continue my studies, but my options within the closed prison estate are very limited because of the research element that is required.

In my view, a version of the faint hope clause should be introduced in England and Wales. It should not be forgotten that lifers are placed on a life licence once released with strict conditions and supervision from a probation officer. A failure to stick to the licence conditions can result in the lifer being

returned to prison. I have mentioned before about the need for a fully informed public consultation, and I feel that this is needed more than ever. If the Government make decisions without taking or listening to public opinion then the result can be civil unrest, as we have witnessed in recent months with the 'Kill the Bill' protests, which are trying to stop the new Sentencing and Courts legislation from progressing into law.

I hope that this letter finds you well.
Take care,
Glenn.

Dear Glenn,

I was really interested to read your letter which considered international comparisons. Admittedly, my own knowledge of international systems is more limited than I would like it to be, and so this reveals another advantage of our ongoing letter writing. In the same way that I sometimes mention journal articles that you might like to read, you also raise issues that encourage me to explore and broaden my understanding of penological issues and debates.

After reading your letter I read about the 'faint hope clause', which I now understand came into effect in Canada in 1976. I read an article about this that presents an interesting connection to points you have raised about public views and consultation. Roberts provided discussion around the clause's controversies,¹¹ and I was particularly drawn to the article's focus on public opinion. Up to 2009, only one poll had asked the public their views about the provision, which Roberts described as 'an astonishing finding given the very public nature of the debate' (p. 539). Unsurprisingly to Roberts, who criticised deficiencies in public opinion research, the representative sample of Canadians involved in the survey were asked misleading questions and given insufficient information to make a decision about their view of the clause. 72 per cent of the respondents subsequently supported the repeal of the provision.

Roberts called this representation of public opinion into question when presenting data

11. Roberts, J. V. (2009). "Faint hope" in the firing line: Repeal of section 745.6? *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 51(4), 537-545.

on the outcomes of applications under the clause which revealed, as of 2008, 83 per cent of the 169 applications (in receipt of a completed hearing) resulted in some reduction in the number of years to be served before parole eligibility. Of those prisoners who reached their revised (earlier) date, 93 per cent were granted release on parole having convinced a superior court judge, a unanimous jury, and members of the National Parole Board. Criticising the role of wider public opinion on this, Roberts argued that 'The outcomes of the hearings tell the whole story' (p.543).

Through my reading, I found that Bill S-6 repealed the 'faint hope clause' from the Criminal Code meaning that those sentenced for murder on or after December 2nd 2011 would no longer be eligible to apply for parole before the eligibility date stated during sentencing. This was disappointing to read given the reduced opportunity for further rehabilitation — something that you have critiqued in reference to England and Wales. This raises points of discussion that I'm sure we will continue to explore in our conversations.

This perhaps leaves our conversation for this article at a suitable 'to be continued' point, reflective of our ongoing dialogue since 2016.

I hope you're well and looking forward to hearing from you soon.

In the meantime, take care,

Helen

Concluding Thoughts

The construction of this written piece began with a mutually agreed set of three core themes that the authors' planned to discuss in a brief series of letters. Through the letter writing process and the consideration of issues concerning coping, hope and

international comparisons, the conversation led to the organic emergence of other themes including the role and nature of public opinion.

Through the sharing of perspectives and the deliberation of a small number of issues, this written piece demonstrates not only the value in creating a space to consider penological issues in a reciprocal way that permeates prison walls, but also the capacity to instigate the knowledge development of both parties by introducing each other to contemporary research findings and international penal processes. Further, while the key themes we have discussed in this article are not novel in the presence of a broad range of existing scholarship, we have also demonstrated how the existing literature can be used by those serving prison sentences to make sense of and articulate their experiences. This is important, particularly for those serving long term sentences to develop a grasp of time that initially appears lost. The academic literature, in our case, also serves as an important conduit to continue to discuss our shared interests and raise questions that spark critical thought.

Considering international systems of justice enabled our conversation to come full circle, for this article at least. Beginning with the proposition of the potential benefit of wide-reaching public consultation about the future of prisons, we have also highlighted the problematic nature of misinformed views, both through considering media representations of prisons and people within them, and also drawing on the concerning consequences of misinformed public consultation leading to calls for the repeal of progressive practices in Canadian criminal justice.

This leaves us wondering what the public really think about sentencing and prisons, or rather, what the public would think if there was a concerted effort to invite the public into transparent, informed discussion and debate. This article, and indeed this special issue of the Prison Service Journal, serve as part of that concerted effort by bringing physically separated people together in conversation and openly sharing insight into reciprocal dialogue with a wider audience.

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