A brief account of life as an IMB member.

ARTICLE FOR EXTERNAL PUBLICATION

FANCY BEING A CHOCOLATE TEAPOT?

I am a member of an Independent Monitoring Board at one of HM Prisons. All over the country each prison or Immigration Retention Centre has a monitoring Board. We are all volunteers who give up our time (usually around 4/5 days per month) and we wonder around prisons. We have our own keys, we can observe the daily routine of the specific establishment to which we are allocated. It is usually around 10/20 miles of where we live, in my case 9 miles.

I received training, to understand how prison works, how to walk about safely within the prison, and what the prison does to progress each prisoner through his or her sentence. In my case I work within a male lifer prison, which is for men who have been given a life sentence and who have to address various concerns before they can be considered for release.

I was addressing a number of prisoners recently to explain our role, and here I heard the view they thought us as useful as a chocolate teapot. This started a lively debate for on paper the prisoners have a point. We cannot change anything, but we do observe and when we see things that are wrong we do report to the Prison Service. Through this system we influence what is happening.

Who are we? Well a complete mix across society. Many of us are retired, some are still working, some are housewives, we come from a mixed background. Our attitude to the criminal society could not be any different. For my own view I came into this work with the attitude “lock em up and throw away the key”. Others are perhaps are more compassionate. This varied attitude is indeed a strength.

I came to the conclusion you can’t simply throw away the key. In some cases yes, and these people will never be released, but in other cases they can change and can progress. There is an incredible amount of work (and cost) undertaken to change prisoners perceptions of life. It was recommended I read a book by a previous Inspector of Prisons, Lord Ramsbottom who said you can divide prisoners up between the good, the bad and the sad. How true.

So, there is a prison near you who are probably wanting recruits to their IMB (Independent Monitoring Boards) If you want to see how we as a society deal with this problem why not contact your local prison and arrange to meet for an informal chat, or contact the IMB secretariat, at Ashley House, 2 Monck Street, London SW1P 2BQ Tel 0207 035 2261, Email imb@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk or search our web site on www.imb.gov.uk, it could be just the interest you have been looking for.

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