

## WHISTLE-BLOWER WITHOUT A WHISTLE

*Daisy Mallet,  
IMB Chair*

**I have been a member of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) for over three years. I'm not a 'typical' member in the sense that I'm nowhere near retirement age. I became a mature student and graduated four years ago with BSc (Hons) in Criminology. My first contact with offenders, ex or otherwise, was back in the 1980's whilst working in admin for NACRO. I met some real characters, but was concerned that the work programmes we delivered didn't offer real jobs for any of them. That made a lasting impression on me.**

Today, now many years later, the problem of work for them after custody I find is still huge issue.

Whilst being a member of the IMB I have written over 40 weekly reports to the Governor, two Annual Reports, endless minutes of meetings, attended conferences, area meetings, visited many other prisons (of every security category) and spoken at various meetings and events about my work. I have completed goodness knows how many hours of training, both in-house and off site.

All this as an unpaid volunteer.

I have no problem being a volunteer, I enjoy my work, but we have to be realistic too. The role of what 50 years ago was then called the 'Board of Visitors' is not what it is today. I discharge a professional role in a professional way, I am assessed as an individual in triennial reviews and my Board is subject to Annual Team Performance Reviews.

The world of prisons today is very different to what it was half a century ago. The Prison Rules have changed, prisons have changed, and the demographic of prisoners has changed massively too. With self-harming, mental health issues, suicides, New Psychoactive Substances, extremism, radicalisation, security issues, my monitoring functions have increased, I am increasingly assessed on my abilities, and each year more and more is expected of me and my Board as a whole.

My role on the IMB is a valuable one, with clear legal powers to monitor what happens to people in prison, it is a responsible role so why, I increasingly ask myself, should I not be paid for what I do?

Others I believe would want to be, and quite rightly too.

It is not about being greedy, it is about recognising the role has changed and adapting the system to fit the functions that today I am expected to discharge.

I have been told that I am keen,

professional, team minded, results focused and enthusiastic...

But I'm also completely frustrated.

I see so much going on around the prison estate, and not just where I work, that doesn't add up. At times it's like having your hands tied behind your back because there is little that you can do about it. To be able to work effectively I have to make sure that the relationships with governors and IMB members remain positive and that we continue to have open dialogue. I am not there to manage the staff - but neither should they manage my Board or me.

But that is what it feels like.

I am there to monitor, not manage, but in real life it is easier said than done.

At times I want to ask staff what the hell they are doing or not doing, I want to be a voice, I want to question, that is the purpose of my existence, but there are too many restrictions in day-to-day practice that do not exist in legal theory.

It's like walking a tightrope, trying to keep the right balance between maintaining a positive working a relationship with the Governor, and keeping the credibility of the prisoners and the public.

When I make the prison aware of issues with prisoners I am made to feel like I'm an irritation to them, but I am not here to irritate the prison process, I exist to monitor outcomes and it is my job to make the prison aware of issues.

Prisons today are starved of resources. The Offender Management Unit (OMU), is an essential department within a Category D 'open' prison, but often there are staff off sick, on holiday, no one covering, or they are new to the job and prisoners are continually frustrated by their lack of communication with them. We then get the brunt end of their dissatisfaction.

I want to speak out, I am here as the public's eyes and ears, that is my role, but my voice is silenced, I am gagged by grooming. Over the last half a century IMBs have been subtly conditioned to behave, the threat of removal is ever-present, and although Parliament has given me quite extensive powers I feel impotent to exercise them.

I write this having read the on line version of the Editorial to this edition of The Prisons Handbook. Having read it I wrote to the Editor that "I feel more inclined to resign as Chair of HMP XYZ after reading your editorial, I work very hard at my role and you have destroyed it in one swoop."

But actually he was right in everything that he said.

He asks why we never do night visits, even though we have the legal powers to do so. I believe that like many Boards we never do unannounced visits at night because we use the excuse that there is only a skeleton staff on duty and if anything happened, if an incident occurred I would be concerned that I would be

held responsible for the disturbance.

In truth however we do not do them because we know it would be frowned upon.

In any case, if something did happen who would help me? I am able to draw keys to the prison but like all IMB Members I have neither a phone, a radio nor a whistle.

I won't compromise my own security, I'm only a volunteer.

Why we never have a radio I cannot understand; how am I supposed to call for help, or be alerted to live incidents in the prison I am legally expected to monitor, if I cannot be contacted?

If I was paid and had support then I would calculate the risk, but I'm not.

The only way to be in the prison during the night would be to accompany the Governor, but how independent would that be?

The Prison Service employs Night Patrol Officers, who as their title implies only work at night. By not doing night visits, as I have the legal power to do but have been gently coerced into avoiding, the result is that there are staff in my prison who I have never as a result met. IMBs should be visible and available to everyone – how can I monitor the prison properly if I am never there for 50% of the time?

We are independent yet the Secretariat is based at the Ministry of Justice in London. The 2016 IMB conference was held there and many of the area meetings I attend are also there. It doesn't feel like we are independent. These events should be held on neutral ground, at a location determined by us, not them.

I have had a really difficult issue to deal with recently but found myself very much isolated without support from the Secretariat, an apology later was not enough. I was so close to resigning.

Last year I decided to join the Association of Members of Independent Monitoring Boards (AMIMB), I had to do this secretly as membership isn't encouraged, it is not openly said, it is another aspect of grooming, of being managed. I was intrigued as to what the fuss was all about. I have since found other members on my Board who are AMIMB members – who also kept it secret.

We have a National IMB Council that openly and officially refuses to enter into discussions with AMIMB. I want to know why, but no-one seems to be able to tell me.

I still don't understand the history of why these two organisations, AMIMB and the National Council, don't work together. AMIMB offer practical workshops that I have found to be valuable, but the costs have to be met by me, there are no expenses for these despite their value.

This then limits who can attend especially if they are held in London.

All prisons have a representative on the National Council. Our previous National Council rep was not keen on an IMB member supporting AMIMB – why I do not know, all I

can say is that in my experience they are a professional organisation, who are focused on independence and monitoring as it should be done. I wonder if the National Council isn't just another level of 'management' or 'middle man' that is unnecessary?

Why can we not go directly to the Ministry of Justice as our legal powers assert we should do?

Each year my Board has to write an Annual Report in which we submit questions to the Secretary of State. The reality of the situation, however, is that our questions are then passed back to the Governor, who answers them, and reports back to the Secretary of State. So the culmination of our work seems to be for the Governor, not the Government.

In 2014 I met Angela Levin, the former IMB Chairman of Wormwood Scrubs, when she gave evidence at the Justice Select Committee and I have read her book. Her account of what was happening within that prison seemed to fall on deaf ears; she could only say what she wanted to say after she had left the IMB.

That's not what should be happening.

Surely if we as IMB members are appointed by the Secretary of State then we should be able to raise alarms when things happen and not wait until the Annual Report is due.

Why on earth can we not speak to the press or local media?

That is what 'independent' in 'Independent Monitoring Boards' means doesn't it?

Oh in theory of course we can, the Secretariat will say that, and they're right too. But in practice we can't, it is another of those things that are 'frowned upon', another example of how we are subtly groomed to behave ourselves.

If we have a suicide in my prison I want to be able to speak about it, express our condolences to the family, explain that an investigation by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman will be conducted, in addition to an inquest. I want to be the voice of independence, express that we will learn lessons of why someone decided to take their own life rather than face the anguish of one more day – but I can't do any of that.

Nationally over 250 people died in our prisons last year, almost a hundred of whom took their own lives, and not a single word was said about any of those deaths publicly by any IMB. I am sorry but that has to change – there is nothing more serious in a prison than the loss of life, we must be able to speak out independently about it. Likewise, if we see good practice then it should be shared, but it isn't.

I do my unpaid job professionally. Over the last two weeks I have spent many days in my prison, either attending meetings or doing my rounds as an IMB member. An outsider looking at this prison would be charmed by its rural setting, herbaceous borders and woodland.

Yes it seems an ideal place to spend the last months or years of your sentence. It has an excellent record, rated highly by the Inspectorate for Prisons and Ofsted. I personally check through all the complaints within the prison both internal and external to see if there are any patterns or themes emerging showing potential problems within the system.

I have found none.

On a monthly basis I plough through all the files concerning those prisoners who have for one reason or another been returned to closed conditions. I need to make sure there are legitimate reasons why a prisoner is sent back to a closed prison. All seems above board, I rarely have any issues to bring up about this. The prison ticks all the right boxes.

Yet, what concerns me most is the utter boredom of so many of the prisoners it's debilitating.

The media portrays prisoners as having a low IQ, high percentage with a reading age of an 11 year old; many have been in care and come from seriously complex situations. What they don't report on, and which we given the nod to say so to the media would correct, are that prisoners are also intelligent, have skills that could benefit other prisoners and need something worthwhile or in other words purposeful activity to do whilst in prison.

For many it takes time and effort to achieve Cat D 'open prison' status, it is as though it is sold to them as 'The Promised Land'. Alas, when they arrive it is a different matter. In an open prison they can go to Education classes for functional skills, complete courses in manual work such as plastering and work either inside or outside the prison. They cannot go above level two due to funding and the work often means working in a charity shop in the next town or if they are very lucky taking dogs for walks around set routes.

On one occasion I spent time talking to two prisoners, both were sentenced for fraud and both were so bored. They didn't want to retrain in bricklaying or painting and decorating or learn how to clean different types of flooring.

They wanted to use their brains, but prison and especially resettlement prisons do not cater for that. Lives are wasted here; I see it all the time. No wonder 'legal highs' are so rife within prisons, it is the only way they get some sort of stimulus.

There are not enough links with the outside community, with colleges and University both of which are local. Too few businesses are willing to give prisoners another chance, but without a fresh start it is impossible for them to be reintegrated back into society.

So many organisations are involved in the 'prison industrial complex' big money is made out of those who find themselves on the wrong side of the law. Everyone wants a slice of the action, the profits, but too little is ploughed back into the prison to be concentrated on the

prisoners and reducing reoffending. Prisoners are people, not some strange aliens from another planet.

I'm not naive; there are many hardened prisoners and career criminals that I have talked with.

All this and more I want to say, but I cannot do so. I have written this anonymously, not because I do not want to put my name to it but because I can't. I know that while others will benefit from this openness, for me it would likely be the end of the IMB road.

I'm a whistle-blower who doesn't have a whistle.

I now hold the position of Chairman of the board and I don't take it lightly.

I manage a board of 10 members, all white, middle class, and not a true representation of either the locality or the prison population. I'm sure part of the problem lies in the fact that we are not paid, I'm sorry but it is a sore point for me and, I suspect, also for the vast majority of IMB members up and down the country if they like me were able to speak out about it.

The recruitment process for adding members to my Board has been somewhat a joke.

I have twice taken part in this process, the first time by escorting potential members around the prison. This I found to be advantageous as I was able to see how they responded to prisoners, staff and Governors and it gave me an indication if they really had the skills that we needed.

However, I was not encouraged to then report back to the Secretariat, so they were recruited to my Board on the strength of the interview without the benefit of any feedback from me, the Chair of the Board they were to be appointed to; in short it was a 'tick box' exercise.

The second time I was actually on the interview panel and, somewhat amazingly, I was told beforehand that whatever their score their names would be put forward for appointment to my Board.

What a ridiculous way to add members.

The consequence of this somewhat pathetic process is that I now have to steer certain members into their role when they are really hard work, and simply just not suitable. On paper my Board is short of members, but in reality I just cannot face another recruitment campaign, so I try and build the team as best as I can.

Unfortunately the majority of IMB members are so far removed from the previous lives of prisoners that I wonder how they can actually relate to them. Having successful ex-offenders, say ten years after release, on an IMB would be beneficial to all.

Why isn't that encouraged or supported?

As the editorial to this edition of The Prisons Handbook makes clear, there has been concerns that IMB members names are kept secret; a request for disclosure has been refused.

I am quite open about the fact that I am

the Chairman of a Board, why hide it?

Yes there will be those that are concerned about security but like others I wear a name badge with my full name on it and it's obvious I live in the locality.

There are greater issues in our prison system to be concerned about surely?

I try to instil our independence and the importance of our role. Taking on this role, writing this article, was not an attempt to raise my own profile; instead it was primarily to raise the profile of the IMB.

*I want the IMB to be seen and heard.*

I have many questions:

Why can't the IMB work more closely with the Inspectorate of Prisons?

Why are we volunteers?

Why are prisoners often sceptical of our ability to look into issues on their behalf?

**Where is our voice?**

*Daisy Mallet (pseudonym)*

*IMB Chair. HMP Frustrated*

## PRISON REFORM: PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH

**Prime Minister's speech on Prison Reform, delivered at the Policy Exchange London on 8th February 2016.**

Let me begin with a pretty extraordinary fact: it's well over 20 years since a Prime Minister made a speech solely about prisons.

To be frank, it can sometimes be easy for politicians to worry so much that their words will be caricatured, that they might just as well avoid this whole area.

And it can be easy for us all – when these buildings are closed off by high walls and barbed wire – to adopt an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude. I want this government to be different.

When I say we will tackle our deepest social problems and extend life chances, I want there to be no no-go areas.

And that must include the 121 prisons in our country, where our social problems are most acute and people's life chances are most absent.

So today, I want to explain why I believe prison reform should be a great progressive cause in British politics, and to set out my vision for a modern, more effective, truly twenty-first century prison system.

My starting point is this: we need prisons.

Some people – including, of course, rapists, murderers, child abusers, gang leaders – belong in prisons. For me, punishment – that deprivation of liberty – is not a dirty word.

I never want us to forget that it is the victims of crime who should always be our principal priority.

And I am not unrealistic or starry-eyed about what prisons can achieve. Not everyone

shows remorse, and not everyone seeks redemption.

But I also strongly believe that we must offer chances to change, that for those trying hard to turn themselves around, we should offer hope, that in a compassionate country, we should help those who've made mistakes to find their way back onto the right path.

In short: we need a prison system that doesn't see prisoners as simply liabilities to be managed, but instead as potential assets to be harnessed.

But the failure of our system today is scandalous. 46% of all prisoners will re-offend within a year of release. 60% of short-sentenced prisoners will reoffend within the same period.

And current levels of prison violence, drug-taking and self-harm should shame us all. In a typical week, there will be almost 600 incidents of self-harm; at least one suicide; and 350 assaults, including 90 on staff.

This failure really matters.

It matters to the public purse: this cycle of reoffending costs up to £13 billion a year.

It matters to you: because in the end, who are the victims of this re-offending? It's the mother who gets burgled or the young boy who gets mugged.

It matters to the prison staff – some of the most deeply committed public servants in our country – who have to work in dangerous and often intimidating conditions.

And yes, it matters to the prisoners themselves, who mustn't feel that society has totally given up on them.

I'm clear: we need wholesale reform.

And I am convinced that with the right agenda, we can be world leaders in change just like we have been in welfare, just like in education – we can demonstrate that with the right reforms, we can make a lasting difference to people in our society.

*Resetting the debate*

Now that begins with resetting the terms of the debate, especially when there are unhelpful, but well-worn mantras that I think hold progress back.

For years, education was set back by the soft bigotry of low expectations – the idea that the most disadvantaged children shouldn't be expected to achieve the best results.

Likewise, police reform was partly set back by the false notion that the number of officers you had mattered, more than how smartly they were actually deployed.

And welfare reform was set back by the lazy idea that fairness could be judged by the size of a cheque, rather than the chances you offered.

One by one, in this government we've taken those arguments on – and we created the platform for reform.

Today, we need to do the same with prisons.

I think there are 3 views that have held back our progress.