

Lidington: Putting security and rehabilitation at the heart of prison reform

David

Lidington, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, speaking today at Conservative Party Conference in Manchester, said:

(Check against delivery)

“Yesterday morning, as Lord Chancellor, I joined our country’s senior judges and lawyers in Westminster Abbey to mark the opening of the new legal year. Then we processed together across Parliament Square to Westminster Hall

–
the heart of our democracy.

It was a great occasion, a celebration of the long history and ancient traditions of our legal system.

But at heart, what was being honoured was not wigs and robes, nor ritual and protocol, but the living constitutional principles which that ceremony affirmed.

The rule of law and the independence of the judiciary underpin our democracy and lie at the heart of our way of life. They are the very cornerstone of our freedoms.

No individual, no organization, no government is above the law.

That is why the refusal by the leadership of today’s Labour Party to rule out supporting illegal strikes is a shameful abdication of responsibility from a party seeking to govern.

I believe, this party believes, in the rule of law, and in our system of justice that protects the innocent, punishes the guilty, and gives voice to victims.

And after seven years of Conservatives in office, crime is down by a third. More victims of serious crimes – particularly sexual offences – are coming forward, no longer silenced by fear of stigma or mistrust.

Of course there is always more to be done. That’s why, together with Amber Rudd, I am developing a comprehensive strategy to tackle domestic violence and abuse, a pernicious crime that has been in the shadows for too long in our country.

I pay tribute to our Prime Minister, Theresa May, who has been

unwavering in the fight against injustice throughout her time at the Home Office and in Downing Street.

I also want to thank my outstanding ministerial team – Dominic Raab, Sam Gyimah, Phillip Lee and Richard Keen, our whips Mike Freer and Charlotte Vere and our PPSs Lucy Frazer and Alan Mak. They all work incredibly hard for our party and for our country.

They deserve our thanks.

The greatest challenge facing our criminal justice system is in our prisons.

The men and women who work in our prisons are the unsung heroes of the criminal justice system.

Day in, day out, they accept responsibility for more than 86,000 offenders, to keep them secure and the public safe.

As I've visited prisons and listened to officers and governors, I've been struck by their professionalism, their dedication and their commitment, not just to keep prisons secure, but to do everything they can to help prisoners make a change in their lives.

Too often, this work can be forgotten. It's unseen behind the high walls of our prisons. But we should all take this opportunity to thank our prison staff for what they do on behalf of us all.

Prison officers face enormous pressure. The levels of violence inside our prisons are too high. So are cases of self-harm and suicide among prisoners.

Last year, the Prisons Ombudsman said that the arrival of new synthetic drugs into our prisons was a game-changer. These drugs, smuggled in from the outside, were – he said – increasing violence, debt, poor health, and instability.

Today, more of that drug traffic is being orchestrated by sophisticated criminal networks. Gangs smuggle not only drugs, but mobile phones for their operations. They use drones to drop as much as a kilo of drugs at a time.

They stop at nothing, even spraying children's drawings – sent to inmates – with liquid synthetic drugs to infiltrate our prisons.

This is no cottage industry. This is not a matter of opportunism. It is serious organized crime.

I am determined to do more to track and target that crime. So today I can announce the start of additional intelligence-led counter-drone operations, to disrupt drones as they enter prison airspace and trace them back to the criminals involved.

Inside prisons, we've already deployed hundreds of sniffer dogs trained to detect drugs, and we're working with the technology companies to block mobile signals and drones within the prison walls. And today I can announce pilots of a new generation of body scanners to add to our tools in the fight against drug smuggling.

And we have ramped up our efforts to deploy more and better trained staff. Today we have 868 more prison officers on duty than at the start of the year, meaning we are on course to hire two and half thousand extra frontline officers by the end of 2018. And we are keeping them safer too – training staff to use body-worn cameras to deter assaults and capture evidence whenever they occur.

We will not let up on action to ensure that our prisons are secure and that prison staff and prisoners are safe.

Here today, in Manchester, we are reminded of the loss and the grief this city suffered when terrorists struck here in May, at the most innocent and vulnerable of us all: children emerging from a concert. As the Prime Minister has said, we cannot and must not pretend that things can continue as they are.

We have stepped up the work within prison to contain dangerous extremists, opening separation units to stop our most toxic prisoners from being able to groom or intimidate others. And we've established a counter-intelligence unit to monitor and disrupt the evolving threat of extremism behind bars.

Safety and security are important in their own right, but they've got a broader purpose too. The real prize of a calm and ordered prison environment is to make it possible to transform them into places of genuine reform and rehabilitation.

All but a tiny handful of prisoners will one day be released. And we cannot be satisfied with a situation in which nearly half of prisoners reoffend within a year of release. That failure matters. It matters to us, as Conservatives, because in the end the cost of reoffending is borne by the victims of those crimes.

Let me be clear: those who commit crimes are responsible for their actions. And successful rehabilitation has to start with the prisoner wanting to make it work. There are some who, no matter what support is offered, will show no remorse and no desire to change.

Nothing can excuse crime. But we have to recognise that the problems in our prisons don't start at the gates.

A quarter of prisoners have spent time in care. Many come from homes that were at best chaotic, at worst violent and abusive. And the cycle perpetuates: nearly two thirds of prisoners' sons go on to commit crime. Most prisoners assessed on arrival have the reading skills of an 11-year-old, and half have no qualifications at all.

When these prisoners return to society I want to see them able to get a job and to keep it. I want them willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and their families, keeping on the straight and narrow rather than falling back into their old ways.

And I want more intensive rehabilitation to take place in the community, particularly to tackle offenders with substance misuse and mental health needs.

We also need probation to work better, so we have tough community sentences that command the confidence of the courts and the public.

Now, rehabilitation does not mean that we ignore the need for punishment and deterrence. It means using the time that we have people inside to maximize the chance that they will change their attitudes when they get out, spending as much time as possible in classrooms and workshops, not banged up in cells.

So I am pushing ahead with reform. I am giving prison governors new powers over how their prisons are run. Next year, every governor will be given the power to tailor education and training to the needs of their prisoners. They'll have more freedom to innovate, but they will also be held to account for the results of their work.

And that goes for us too. Openness and transparency are powerful instruments of change. The reports of prison inspectors shine a spotlight on problems. Where recommendations are made by the Inspectorate, they should be followed up. So I have set up a new taskforce, charged with responding promptly and publicly to inspection reports and following those through with action to put problems right – and if we disagree, providing a clear, public explanation.

We have a particular responsibility towards young prisoners. We cannot sit back and allow them to become the adult offenders of tomorrow.

Since we took office in 2010, the number of young people in custody has plummeted – by nearly two-thirds- leaving only the most serious and difficult offenders behind bars.

These youngsters also have the most complex needs.

Youth custody cannot just be the dumping ground for society's problems.

So I can today announce a new investment of £64 million to entrench reform of youth custody. We will boost the number of frontline staff in youth

offender institutions by 20% – that’s 120 additional recruits, including newly trained specialist youth justice workers, equipped to tackle the needs of young offenders.

The work of overcoming the challenges in our prisons means we are also looking beyond the prison walls for solutions.

It includes the work Jeremy Hunt is leading across government on a new strategy for mental health. That will help ensure offenders get the help they need both in prison and after release.

It embraces Justine Greening’s drive to promote high-quality apprenticeships and first-class technical and vocational education to give prisoners – old and young – the chance to get steady, quality work after prison.

The private sector has a role to play, too.

Redemption Roasters, a new start-up working at Aylesbury Young Offender Institution in my own constituency, is offering the boys there a full-time barista training programme, with a real prospect of employability. They are working with one 22 year-old apprentice, who in his own words has “never had any experience of working legit”. He’s now about to begin his first job at Redemption’s flagship coffee shop in central London.

This is what a fresh start looks like.

From Timpsons, to Greggs the bakers, to Halfords, to the construction firm Mitie, employers are appreciating what ex-offenders have to offer: the hard-work and dedication of someone committed to proving they deserve that second chance.

We need to take this further. That’s why I am today announcing a new national task force – the New Futures Network – to match offenders with employers and make sure training in prisons mirrors the demands in the local jobs market.

The evidence shows that a former prisoner who has got both the responsibility and opportunity that comes with work is far less likely to reoffend. Getting prisoners into employment works.

This work of reform is ambitious and difficult. I’m not going to promise instant solutions. We are dealing with some of the most troubling and troubled people in society.

But there are two things which, despite those difficulties, still fill me with hope.

The first is the success stories I’ve heard in our prisons.

There's the officer in Northumberland who runs the recycling yard in his prison, who's built basic English and Maths skills into the work, and set up links with local businesses to secure jobs for his men when they've done their time.

One of the prisoners in his team put it this way. He said: "Not only does this give us hope, it also gives us purpose in life".

Or the prisoner in South Wales who told me how it was the work of staff there to maintain and strengthen contact between prisoners and their families that had finally made him realise how much damage his criminal past and his absence in prison had caused to a partner and children whom he loved, and how he was determined, once released, not to let them down again.

Or the amazing work by charities, from women's groups to churches to sports clubs to get them to see that there is a better way than going back to a life of crime. I want to see charities and voluntary groups, large and small, play an even stronger role as we move forward with our reforms.

And the second thing that gives me both hope and confidence is what, after more than 40 years of membership, I know about our Party.

We say that the Conservative Party is the party of one nation. We are at our best when we speak and act and work on behalf of every part of this country, when we strive to do our best for people from all walks of life, whatever their background, their accent, their beliefs or the colour of their skin.

And just as there can be no no-go areas, no city, no estate, no street that is out-of-bounds for us in our campaigning, so there should be no area of policy, no social challenge that we should fear to address.

So let our government and our party work together, with energy, confidence and determination on the great cause of prison and penal reform.

And through our efforts let us pass on to the next generation a country that is more fair, more ready to offer a second chance, and more just than the one that we inherited ourselves."

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