

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE LAW CONFERENCE

Martin Jones

Good afternoon. I am delighted to be here and am grateful to Andrew for inviting me to speak on these issues.

I have been CEO of the Board since 2015. I have spent the last 25 years working as a policy maker and practitioner in the justice system.

Up front I want to be clear I am proud to lead the Board and proud of the decisions we take.

We make critical; life changing decisions. I think on any objective assessment we do a good job – but we also need to be honest in identifying areas where we need to improve.

Context

The aim of the Parole Board is to determine whether it is satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public that the prisoner should be detailed.

That is a balancing act.

All of the people considered by the Parole Board have committed a serious offence – sometimes the most grave – or are assessed as being a risk to the public. None of the people we consider are risk free. How can they be? Nobody is risk free.

It is important that we approach each case with an open mind and base our decisions on the evidence.

Let us be clear on some facts:

The Parole Board makes 25,000 decisions each year.

28% of the prison population are in scope of a parole hearing. Most people are automatically released.

Most of the people we see have committed serious sexual or violent offences.

Many will have been in prison for many years -sometimes many decades.

According to the statistics our decisions are sound – the number of people charged with a serious offence after a parole release is a fraction of 1%.

The published data shows that the highest reoffending rates are not amongst those who commit the most serious offences. The highest rate of reoffending is amongst those who are serving short custodial sentences.

We know that long term incarceration has a significant impact on propensity to commit further offences. We know that peak offending is in the 18-25 age bracket. We know that people can commit serious crimes and go on to be worthwhile members of society. But sadly we do not have a crystal ball. Our system is not infallible – because we are making decisions on people...

Where we are today

Our status, our role and the way we have worked has changed fundamentally over the last 50 years and continue to change. Most people would agree I think that the changes made have resulted in a better, fairer system.

We are now an independent court like body. I consider the Board to be to all intents and purposes a judicial body. We direct release. We hold thousands of hearings. We provide detailed reasons we direct the release of thousands of people.

Our independence is precious to us – and I have always been clear that I will defend that independence – but we also need to ensure we have the confidence of the public.

I do not think we have that confidence – because there is insufficient awareness of sentencing, our place in the system, and why we make our decisions.

We should not be afraid of explaining our work and our decisions.

- Over the last year the board has been working hard to improve understanding:
- Our website has been overhauled and simplified.
- We have a new short video explaining how we work.
- We are planning to launch a short video for victims.
- We have, for the first time allowed the anonymised broadcast of a parole hearing.
- We are looking for other opportunities.

Most importantly – we can now publish summaries of our decisions. So even if people don't agree they understand why we have made them. Since 22 May we

have received c1400 requests and issued c 500 summaries. Almost all from victims.

But they do not just get a summary they also get a simple guide explaining our role.

The Board is currently engaged in a programme of work to train VLOs to improve their understanding of the work we do.

You cannot look at a single measure to measure success. I want the Board to be fully transparent about its performance. We have nothing to hide – including being open about areas where we need to improve.

Looking forward we want to be more transparent than ever before; about our decision making; our performance and areas where we need to improve.

I am not afraid to say that the PB has room to improve:

- I have attended dozens of parole hearings and read hundreds of decisions. My assessment is that we are not cavalier with public safety. We take our decisions seriously.
- The Board is heavily reliant on the quality of information provided to it. You cannot expect the Board to make up for failures elsewhere in the criminal justice system – or elsewhere in the penal system.
- Although sexual offences are horrifying. The proven reoffending rate of those offenders is astonishingly small.
- I do not therefore think it is unreasonable for a parole panel to reach the conclusion that a very serious sex offender is capable of being managed successfully in the community with proper supervision. We are asked to make similar decisions in hundreds of cases each month. And I know we will be making more decisions in future year according to the latest published statistics 19% of the sentenced prison population are serving a sentence for sex offences.
- Should the public believe that serious sex offenders are unlikely to commit further sexual offences after release? Well some recent statistics published just weeks ago showed the proven reoffending rates of people released by the Parole Board from indeterminate sentences. Of the cohort of 676 adults released in 2013-14 after two years, how many had been proven to commit a sexual offence? Just one. And that individual was not serving a indeterminate sentence for a sexual offence. In my experience the most dangerous sex offender in the community is the unconvicted/unsuspected sex offender.
- Whilst we should not be complacent we do need to better educate people on the facts.

Going forward I look forward to working with people to try to improve understanding.

We must never forget that victims can be deeply affected by our decisions. I regularly meet with victims and I am clear that we should always listen to those views carefully and sensitively. But we should also tell the truth. We do release people who deny their offending. We are not there to punish the offender. Our focus in law is risk.

We should never be afraid to make difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions. We consider some of the most difficult and emotive cases.

But that is why the Board is independent – decisions must be made on the basis of careful objective assessment of the evidence to judge whether the prisoner remains a significant risk to the public - not public opinion and emotion.

Thank you.