

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your kind introduction and for the invitation by the Longford Trust to address this distinguished audience. I am indeed deeply honoured to be able to contribute, in this modest way, to the legacy of Lord Longford. And I am thrilled and impressed that so many professionals and experts have come here to listen tonight.

I want, for the next half hour or so, tell you about the work of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. I will share with you our current hopes, fears and frustrations. My ambition is to describe how we care for some of the most vulnerable groups in our Swedish welfare society. And by doing so, I hope to convince you that we make a significant contribution to the safety and security of our country.

The role of politicians

Let me first offer some words of caution and qualification.

I will not in any way claim that the way we do things in Sweden is the only solution to the challenges we all face in this area. Our work is carried out in many different ways, even in countries that are very similar, and so it must be. Our political contexts and legal systems are different, as are the general conditions under which our work is done. What I can say is that we believe that our model works for us, and that it has served us well for a long time. If our strategies can give food for thought to others, it is only a fair repayment for all the influences we as a small country over the years have had from abroad in this complex area. The UK has certainly been one of many sources of inspiration for us.

It may also be worth pointing out that in Sweden, individual members of government are constitutionally prohibited from interfering with the way we as a public service carry out our work. The government, not a minister, defines our overall goals and the parliament provides the legal framework and the funds we need to do the job. How we carry out our work is, in almost every aspect not regulated by law, entirely up to us.

We therefore have a great deal of freedom, both in terms of how we organize ourselves, and the working strategies we develop. More importantly, it provides a clear division of labour between the political level and the public administration. In policy areas where there are strong public opinions, this has proven to be beneficial. For my service, the system secures our ability over time to implement our strategies consistently. In other words, we have the power to stick to the ideas we believe in.

10 million individuals

Over 10 million people are imprisoned throughout the world today. Let me start by saying that I believe that many of them are precisely where they should be. I do not for a minute agree with those who claim that prison systems do not work by default. That's simply wrong. They work just fine, provided you have the right prisoners in them and your idea is to make people better, not worse.

Having said that, when you start taking that 10 million prisoner figure apart, you will soon discover that it covers a very diversified group of people.

Some are in prison because of their political or religious beliefs and they should never have been put there in the first place. Many have not even been officially charged with a crime. They spend year after year, waiting for a trial that may or may not come.

The Swedish author and journalist Dawit Isaak is one of them. He has now spent more than 12 years in a prison in Eritrea, still without being charged of any specific crime. For the past 8 years no one has had any information about him at all. He shares his fate with thousands of other political prisoners.

Let's also remember that a number of these 10 million individuals are children. Some have indeed broken the law, but most of them are in prison because one or both of their parents have been incarcerated and left them with nowhere else to go.

So you will easily see that we are not looking at a group of 10 million criminals. We are talking about 10 million individuals. Despite their differences, all of them do have several things in common.

First, most of them are in pre-trial detention centres and prisons that were designed to break people down, not prepare them for reintegration into society.

Second, almost all of them will one day return back to life in society, wherever that is.

Third, the overwhelming majority of all prisoners will be in a poorer physical and psychological shape than they were before.

The fourth thing they have in common is that they will all be stigmatized and ill seen by the rest of civil society when released.

Last, but not least, very few of them are happy with their situation. They may not overtly or convincingly argue for their wish for a change. But they certainly don't argue the opposite either. There is in my opinion almost always potential for change.

But why should we pay attention to the prison situation in countries far away from our own? Do we not have enough headaches as it is?

One of the points I want to make tonight is that how penal sanctions are carried out should be a matter of interest and concern to the international community. An increasing number of people throughout the world can and will travel long distances in search for a better life for themselves and their families. Also very broken people with criminal records will do so. This will and already does affect the criminal justice sector in many of our societies. To me this is not merely a hypothesis, but a reality and a fact that I can see first hand in Sweden.

A global perspective

I think it was one of your former and world famous prime ministers who once said: *“Show me your prisons and I will tell you what society you live in.”* That statement is still valid today. Prison conditions in many parts of the world are nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe waiting to erupt. I mention this not to add to the darkness of things, but actually to bring a little light to the discussion. The reason is that I can see some quite remarkable developments in many different parts of the world. Let me mention just one of them.

I have just returned from a visit to Namibia where I had a series of meetings with African prison and probation officers and colleagues. It became very clear to me that in many of the countries on that continent, there is significant progress being made.

The most important one is that our business is being handed over from the military and police, to its rightful place in judicial system. Professional services are being forged with a strong set of humanitarian values. The reintegration goals they have defined appear to be very similar to our own.

The importance of this can hardly be overstated. It may appear as insignificant in a European context, as we passed that point long time ago, but I assure you, it is very encouraging for the future of prison policies and human rights in Africa. We should actively support it.

My point is that challenges in our business are similar wherever in the world they appear. Designing criminal justice systems is about making the same hard choices, whatever political and legal context.

The bad news is that you need to think hard before you make any of these choices. The decisions you need to take are seldom comfortable whether in Africa or in Sweden or in the UK. Often they involve challenging strong public opinion. And you can be quite certain that the choices you make will be very costly.

The good news, however, is that there are only a few such choices to be made. In terms of “cracking codes” in prison and probation systems, two of

them are fundamental. Let me explain how we have dealt with them in my jurisdiction:

Alternatives to custody

The first and most important one is about deciding whether you give priority to custodial or non-custodial penalties. In other words, do you incarcerate people with a rush? Or do you try to keep people out of prison as long as possible and use alternative sanctions instead?

To our profession, the answer is very clear. The use of imprisonment must always be the very last resort, not your first preferred option. When I meet colleagues from other countries, we spend time comparing data on incarceration rates, admission rates, costs per inmate and percentages of reoffending. That's how we benchmark our work. The underlying ambition of every prison service I know is to reduce prison numbers to a minimum. I don't think that is a coincidence. We know, better than most others, what the human cost of incarceration is. We see it first hand, every day of our work.

That, however, is rarely how society at large sees it. An American colleague once described this paradox in the following way: He said: *"In the United States we put people in prison not because they are bad, but because we are mad!"*

And that's not just a good illustration of the situation in the USA. There is some of that "madness" also in the public debate in my own country from time to time. When that happens, it tends to cloud the political debate on the purposes and role of prisons and probation. It also makes it difficult for politicians to keep a sharp focus on strategies that actually work.

I guess this is one of the recurring dilemmas we are faced with as a profession, wherever in the world we operate. We are, on the one hand, civil servants loyal to our governments and the political environment. But, on the other hand, we are also a profession, experts on prison and probation. As such, we must from time to time allow ourselves to speak up

and challenge public opinion and political opportunism. It is always painful and often uncomfortable, but it must be done.

I might add that I am quite impressed with the way this is currently being done in North America. Some very courageous American colleagues are taking a firm stand on prison policies on the other side of the Atlantic. In particular, the excessive use of solitary confinement, or administrative segregation as it is called in the US, is being questioned and openly criticized.

In several parts of Europe efforts are now made to substantially reduce prison numbers. Electronic monitoring has become popular in jurisdictions that for many years have rejected that system without further ado. Alternatives such as community supervision are being introduced as well as the concept of low security prisons.

In the right direction?

On the surface, it may indeed appear as a new and encouraging development. It would seem that countries are trying hard to move away from overcrowded prisons to more diversified and comprehensive strategies for carrying out penal sanctions. The interesting questions are why and why now? Is it a coincidence or is it for real? Why, all of a sudden, are non-custodial sanctions perceived as a valid option in places where the opposite was true only a few years ago? Why this sudden change of heart?

There are, I think, at least three different answers to that question:

1. The first answer is that it is simply a response to the financial crises and national budget cuts. In such cases, it has in fact little or nothing to do with shifts in ideology or criminal justice policy. General cuts in public spending is affecting also prison and probation services. In some jurisdictions there have been 20-30% financial reductions over a period of only a few years. In those cases, one might of course suspect that strategies are likely to shift again, once the financial situation so permits.

Let me be clear on one thing. I do not think that economically-driven criminal political reform is necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, as a colleague once put it, "*why waste a good crisis if it can be used for a good cause*".

I am all for pragmatism and even shortsighted strategies are welcome if only the outcome is good. Colleagues in Ireland, for example, have managed to finally introduce new legislation against putting children in prison. This was done in response to a political decision to reduce prison numbers. As a result the St Patrick's Prison for juvenile offenders in Dublin has at last been closed.

2. The second answer is that some attempts to reduce numbers of prisoners are a reaction to a long history of over-incarceration. Excessive costs are usually a consequence of this, but that does not always have to be. In the case of North America, a new and important discussion on who should be in prison, and who should not, is under way. That discussion is about justice, fairness, and proportionality, not economy.
3. The third answer has nothing to do with numbers or money. It is instead based on the conviction that reducing prison numbers to a minimum is the right thing to do - particularly in a long-term effort to enhance safety and security in society.

Also here, there are some new and noteworthy trends. Japan has, for example, recently introduced parole in their criminal system. And as a consequence the Japanese government is building up a sizable probation service. Canada is as usual in the frontline of things and has developed a new ground breaking concept for structuring the dialogue and meetings between a parolee and her or his probation officer in a more effective way.

I think it is fair to say that in these jurisdictions, the changes we see are based on documented and scientifically supported evidence that probation is a more effective penal sanction than prison sentences can ever hope to be. It simply produces better results!

Taking an alternative route

In Sweden, we made that choice a long time ago. We have been giving priority to probation and alternative penal sanctions over imprisonment for many decades now. We have had time to develop our skills and methods for carrying out community service, supervision, electronic monitoring, probation or mandatory treatment. We have made good progress in all of these areas and I believe that we now have a system that is credible and works well for us. We are in the process of developing them even further, and we gladly share the experiences we have with others.

But, you will ask, is it really working? Have we cracked the code? Do we see a change? Are we indeed contributing to making society a safer place?

My answer is yes, I believe we do. Unfortunately, I have little hard scientific evidence or statistical data to show in support of that. Our reoffending figures remain stable over time. About one third of our offenders, 30%, come back to serve another penalty in our prison and probation service within three years. That is a reasonable good figure by any international standard.

If you count everyone who re-offend, including those charged with a fine, the figure is about 40%. Which is still not a bad result. The frustrating part is that those figures have remained more or less unchanged for a long period of time. It would suggest that the impact of all the progress we have made in our work has had a rather limited impact on reoffending.

Falling admissions

But for a few years now, there are signs that may suggest that things are finally changing. Our admission figures, not only to prisons, but to our entire prison and probation service, are dropping significantly. They are down this year by approximately 6 % and have been so on a yearly basis since 2011.

What can possibly explain this? It has come quite unexpectedly and we have completely failed to predict this trend-shift. The honest answer is that we still don't really know for sure. But let me mention a couple of educated guesses.

The first one is that the courts are sentencing in a more lenient way, particularly for drug offences. That we know for a fact. Why is that? One factor has to do with a Supreme Court ruling from 2011 lowering the sentences for serious drug offences by more than one third. Over time this means that the total number of prison years will go down significantly.

The second possible factor is the current reorganization of the police in Sweden. This has most likely led to a lower efficiency in criminal investigations. This, in fact, will explain the lower input into the judiciary as a whole in the past few years.

What we do know is that this drop in admissions has not been the result of an explicit political ambition to empty our prisons. On the contrary, the centre-right wing coalition government in Sweden over the past 8 years, has been tough on crime and keen to criminalize. It has introduced a series of criminal reform packages including increased penalties for serious crime.

But whichever way you look at it, I am convinced that the very long term strategic choice to give priority to probation and non custodial sentences is having a positive effect. We will have to wait a little while longer to be able to confirm this. In the meantime, we have been able to permanently close down some of our oldest and most run down prisons and remand centres.

They will be missed by no one, I can assure you.

How to treat prisoners

Let me now turn to the second of the two choices I mentioned earlier. If the first one is whether you give priority to prison or alternative sanctions, the second is what you do with the people who, after all, should end up in prison. In other words, once you have the right people in prison, what do you actually do with them?

Our Swedish strategy is founded on a few relatively simple principles, all of which I believe, will sound familiar to you:

1. to control the prisons;
2. to make every day count;
3. to treat human beings, not criminals.

Allow me to elaborate on those three points a little, for they are very important to us.

Being in control

Taking control of prisons is primarily about good prison management and good leadership, not parameter security or technology. Our staff operate our prisons and remand centres. They are not run by the prisoners placed in them. That may seem an obvious thing to say, but it has not always been so in our country.

Staff are nowadays the single most important component in our dynamic security strategy. It is true that we have also invested heavily in CCTV, x-ray machines, concrete walls, barbed wire and all of those things. But they are first and foremost there to complement and support our staff and their work.

We have set our security goals very high. We accept no drugs, no alcohol, no contraband, no threats, no violence and no destruction of property in our pre-trial remand centres and our prisons. It has required some very tight security regimes and not everyone has been happy with that over the years. But the results speak for themselves. The last drug screenings we have made showed a less than 1% intoxication rate amongst our inmates.

As in the UK, staff-prisoner relations are what makes the difference. We want our prison officers to be with the prisoners everywhere they are and throughout the whole day. For this to work, there needs to be a set of very clear and very strong core values that underpin our daily work. I cannot overstate the importance of this. Let me give you just one example of how it works in practice.

I recently overheard a prison manager addressing a group of new recruits. She was introducing them to the world of pre-trial detention and prisons. She began her presentation by saying: *“If you want to work on my team, you must like all kinds of people”*.

That captures much our core values in a nutshell. If you don't like people of some particular kind, you cannot be part of our team. We are very clear on that point. If you are afraid of inmates, indifferent to them as individuals and human beings, or in any way disrespect or look down on them because of the situation they are in, then you are by default disqualified from being part our service. We run an operation where unconditional respect for inmates and clients is fundamental to everything that we do. It is not subject to compromise. It must be imprinted throughout the entire organisation and it is non-negotiable.

This is, of course, easy to say and more difficult to achieve - in particular since the role of prison officers in Sweden is a dual one and therefore complex. On the one hand, they are representatives of the criminal justice system, charged with carrying out criminal sanctions, sometimes with the use of force. They are upholding law and order within our premises and therefore control as well as prevent new crimes from being committed and additional victims of crime.

But they are also part of our fundamental supportive environment. Positive and reinforcing interaction with the inmates is vital. They talk, they listen, they reason and they guide. They are in many ways the role models our inmates have never had in their lives.

Asking what is possible

Let me be clear on that point. We don't ask for the impossible. No one can like everyone all the time. That is not the point. There are many daily situations where staff need to correct and intervene firmly and will receive no appreciation in return. Of course there are conflicts, anger and exchanges of harsh words. They will, during their careers, also be exposed to endless trauma, sadness, human disaster and personal disappointments.

A strong faith in people's capacity to change therefore has to be deeply imbedded in our professional value system. In this respect I am very proud of my organisation. The relations between our staff and our clients are healthy and remarkably respectful.

Every day counts

A second important aspect of our strategy is to make every day count. In our system we have relatively short prison sentences. Approximately 80 % of our inmates are sentenced to penalties of less than a year's duration. Given that they have several problems in their lives, and have had them for a long time, the window of opportunity is very short.

Only with a strong supportive environment, addressing the many issues our inmates have, do we stand a chance to make a real difference. The conclusion is therefore that every day in prison must count. In our experience, this is particularly important for our young offenders.

The juveniles get particularly short sentences. We have two very good reasons to start working with them already from the first day: we need to reduce the damaging effects of isolation; and we have to make an early assessment of risk, need and responsivity.

We try to use the time before trial as much as we can to motivate the detainees to treatment, and studies. We also try hard to establish a good relationship with them already at that stage. Without healthy personal relations we cannot hope to help anyone to the kinds of changes we are looking for. Our experience is that there are often good opportunities during the first weeks or months. Once the juveniles reach the prisons, it is much harder to get through to them.

Inmates who appear in our service at an early age also normally have many problems and even more needs. In our experience, you can't work with one factor in isolation from others. Different professions within the prison service have to work with different needs – well coordinated and at the same time.

Our problem is this. We do not choose the point in time when we come into any inmate's life. Most young offenders are with us for a short period of time and we do not control when they leave us. Our odds of success are therefore not very good. For that reason we need to have an exceptionally good plan, if we are to stand any chance at all.

Separating juveniles

To be able to work efficiently with our juveniles, we keep them completely separate from other prisoners in small units of 6-10 inmates. Each unit is staffed with a variety of professional resources - teachers, psychologists, prison and probation officers and treatment staff. They will all work in a coordinated way, preparing for his or her release from the first day to the very last. In other words there will be very little time left for our juvenile offenders to sit around and do nothing during their time with us.

Also the last phase of a prison term is very important. The time during conditional release cannot, in our opinion, be just supervision. We continue with evidence-based cognitive programmes to fight the risk of reoffending. We also need to cooperate intensively with other state or communal authorities like the national employment agency or the social services.

Someone once told me that the only strategy that works with young offenders is to let them grow older and wiser. I would very much like to prove him wrong.

Everyone as an individual

This brings me to the third and perhaps most important component of our strategy. When we look at our survey data on our inmates and see what problems they have in their lives, it is clear that we need to look at the whole picture. We must deal with all the problems they have, not just the ones that got them into prison. And we certainly cannot afford to deal with one problem at the time.

Our approach is to work with all the relevant problems all the time, what we call a “multimodality approach”. If you ignore key factors that can cause reoffending, you jeopardize the whole effort. That is why it is so vitally important that you know what these factors are. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

About three years ago, our staff in one of our high security prisons became fed up with a group of prisoners they had been working with for many years. The majority of them were local offenders with a long history of substance abuse. They had been offered and enrolled in every conceivable treatment programme available to us. We had detoxified them, tried to educate them, offered vocational training, and tried a number of different motivational strategies and advanced therapy. Still, year after year, they kept coming back.

The message we were getting from our staff was very clear: these people are reoffending because we are not addressing all the issues they are struggling with. Our personnel were convinced that it was not their drug addiction that was the issue. They were certain that these prisoners had Attention Deficit Syndrome, ADHD. What they were asking was for headquarters to allow them to offer qualified medical treatment for that diagnosis in conjunction with all the other therapeutic interventions they were already giving.

We listened very carefully and decided to design a randomised controlled scientific study to find out if there really was a connection between the ADHD diagnosis and risk of reoffending. The results were dramatic. The group of prisoners that was offered active medical treatment in combination with a range of other specifically targeted social programmes and therapy, responded so remarkably well that we initially had a hard time believing it. These results have since then been confirmed in other studies and we are now about to launch a nationwide study to further establish the connection between ADHD and the risk of reoffending amongst all our clients and inmates.

The point to all of all this is that part of our challenge is to identify and deal with the underlying factors behind crime and relapse into crime after

release. We now have some very strong scientific evidence suggesting that ADHD is indeed one such factor. If that is true, the implication reaches far beyond the boundaries of prison and probation services. It means we should probably rethink our whole strategy for helping the children and young adults struggling with this particular syndrome in a more systematic way and at an earlier stage of their lives.

This is but one illustration of the dynamic character of most of the problems that our inmates are struggling with. It means that most, if not all of them, can in one way or the other be assessed and addressed. The only static problem that we cannot change is the criminal history of our inmates and clients. But also in this regard, I believe there are things we as a society should do and should not do. One thing we must do is to make sure that a criminal record does not present more of a burden than it already is.

Remove the stigma

Let me conclude on that note, because it is such an important one. In Sweden we are currently experiencing increasing stigmatisation of people with a criminal record. I don't just mean that there is ignorance and anger about the mechanics of crime and criminality. There certainly is a fair amount of that too. As a profession we have not succeeded in informing the general public very well what our work is all about.

But worse than that, there is also still prejudice in the real sense of the word: pre-conceived strong and often revengeful ideas about how society should deal with criminals. I say that with sadness and frustration. I live in one of the richest countries in the world, and one that prides itself of being inhabited by a population that is highly educated. Most of my fellow Swedes will consider prejudice a thing of the past. Still it is clearly alive and well with regards to our prisoners and clients in probation.

This is a real problem for us, as it means that we experience increasing obstacles in getting civil society involved in what we do. Not only that, but we are now also seeing commercial initiatives attempting to make money out of the misfortune of people with a criminal record. An increasing

number of Internet-based companies are now systematically gathering and selling publically available information on convicted people.

This is a new and very unsettling trend. We have one of the most transparent public sectors in the entire world, but it was never the idea that sensitive personal information would be commercialised in this way.

We need to better recognise that whenever crime and criminals are discussed, there are strong feelings of fear, frustration and anger involved. The incentives for economic exploitation and political opportunism are there. I don't believe that legislation is going to be able to do much about that. What I would like to see, however, is more civil courage, more people outside the business of criminal justice taking a firm stand for what I think most people, upon reflection, will consider principles of basic human decency.

If we stop giving people second chances, then what is the point of it all?

The business of prison and probation is about two things, people and change. Our work rests on a few relatively simple principles. Much of our strategy boils down to the need for adequate staff resources. Yes, prison and probation systems are labour intensive and therefore very costly. In my service, we have a staff ratio of almost 1:1. The consequence is that we are currently the fourth largest state run service in the country. Even so, I am convinced that the alternative would be even more costly to society.

Another way of putting it is that we have been fortunate enough to have strong political support for what we do, and wise politicians who have been prepared to back us financially for a long time. The importance of that cannot be overstated. In times of economic decline, this is of course difficult to maintain. Prison services around Europe are currently experiencing severe budget cuts, and so are we. The long-term effects of this therefore give cause for concern.

In the end, it must be the results that count. If we reach our goals and manage to increase safety and security in society, it will be money well spent and an investment worth making. I firmly believe that anyone who

takes the trouble of looking hard at what we do in this business, 7 days a week, 365 days per year, will come to the same conclusion.

Let me end by again quoting another one of my experienced prison officers. She commented on her relationship to the inmates in the following way: *"I am sometimes sad at the end of my working day. It is not a criminal I see when I lock the cell door. It is a person."*

If there is a code to be cracked in prison and probation work, it is probably this one that counts the most. If you can afford to have many people like that on your team, you are sooner or later going to succeed. Of that I am convinced.

Thank you so much for listening.