

## The Royal Society of Edinburgh

### Airborne Initiative Public Lecture – “Meet Danny”

Dr Andrew McLellan

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Report by Peter Barr

#### The insanity of prison

*“Prisons sometimes do good but they always do harm” was how Dr Andrew McLellan concluded his lecture on the problem of finding “realistic alternatives” to prison for young offenders. And to grasp the opportunity for change, he declared, we need to realise that these young offenders belong to us all...*

Dr Andrew McLellan may talk himself out of a job as Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons, but nothing would give him more pleasure than to see our overcrowded jails emptied of inmates, because rather than viewing our prisons as a cure for society’s ills, he believes they are one of the causes.

His started and ended his lecture with six thought-provoking quotations, from a wide range of people including Albert Einstein and former First Minister, Henry McLeish:

1. “We should do all we can to keep people out of jail.”
2. We can’t reverse the damage done to children if there’s an “absence of nurture beyond age two or three”.
3. “Prisons can’t solve the problems of Scotland.”
4. Most offenders are “daft lads and lassies,” not villains.
5. “Insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results.”
6. To halve the prison population, everyone must “grasp the opportunity for change.”

Einstein’s definition of insanity echoed McLellan’s description of the typical cycle experienced by many young offenders, who commit crimes again and again and are institutionalised again and again, then carry on doing the same when they’re older. That’s why prisons are not the solution, he said. Housing, education, better health care and employment, as well as drug and alcohol treatment, are the keys to success, and what happens after release matters much more than prison itself.

The crime–prison cycle can sometimes seem impossible to break, but taking inspiration from Barack Obama, McLellan thinks that “yes we can” can transform Scotland’s all-too-common attitude of “no we cannae.” He also thinks that if we want to bring hope, not despair, “it’s now or never – the opportunity won’t come again in our generation.”

McLellan then described a few examples of programmes which do make a difference, including the Venture Trust, Columba 1400, The Duke of Edinburgh Awards, Includem and the Motorcycle Project. Like the Airborne Initiative, these projects challenge young people emotionally and socially, and “powerful learning takes place,” said McLellan. Young people get more confidence through gaining a sense of achievement and working as part of a team, and drug abuse tends to reduce at the same time as the rate of offending behaviour. The projects are also fun, said McLellan – a far cry from typical prison conditions. And the lesson which McLellan draws from all of these projects is that if politicians want to reduce crime,

they should pay more attention to youth groups, and invest more in probation and community services, both of which are now “hopelessly underfunded.”

Some new programmes offer considerable hope for the future. For example, in “Routes out of prison” young offenders are mentored immediately after release by a former offender who knows how they feel and can speak the same language. The mentor not only offers advice but accompanies the person to appointments at job centres and housing offices, etc, to make sure offenders stay focused on trying to rebuild their lives, instead of drifting back into their old ways.

What we need for young offenders, said McLellan, is what social workers call, “wraparound support” including a new approach to probation, integrated with health care, education and help with employment and housing. All of this would cost a lot of money, he admitted, but how much do we value our young people – and how much do we spend on our prisons already? Why is it, he asked, that we question the value of punishment in the community much more than we question the value of prisons?

To put a human face on these ideas, McLellan then invited the audience to “Meet Danny” – a young man who has been in and out of the Young Offenders Institution in Polmont three times already this year. Like 90 per cent of the inmates, Danny is a repeat visitor, and he sometimes returns in a matter of days, a victim of his own alcohol problem, which started when Danny was just eight years old.

Conditions in Polmont have improved significantly in recent years, but there is no escape from some things such as the lack of privacy and overcrowding. There are programmes to help with addiction and relationship problems, including a course to help young offenders become more aware of the consequences of their own actions, but despite all the good work that Polmont and other institutions may do, McLellan very strongly believes that it cannot provide all the answers. And the statistics confirm this – the 575 inmates have committed 4,508 offences between them, or an average of seven per person, and the figures will only get worse unless we change our attitudes to treating young offenders.

Finally, McLellan added, we need to change our attitudes to the young people themselves, and realise that “prisoners are not *them* – they are *us*.”

During the Q&A session which followed, the focus was mainly on what happens after release, which McLellan described as the heart of the matter. For example, when Danny leaves Polmont (with the best of intentions), he enters a chaotic world, but has very little support, and soon re-offends, and this is where a scheme like “Routes out of prison” could help, combined with more attention to housing, employment and health care, and perhaps compulsory treatment for addiction.

Asked what happens six months after young people attend demanding residential courses like those run by Fairbridge, McLellan agreed that we can’t always monitor progress or follow up as much as we would like. He also said it would be “wildly optimistic” to expect we could heal all the damage, but that giving young people a chance is better than no chance at all. The public may be understandably concerned about crime and repeat offenders, and want them sent to prison to be punished, but what we most need is a mind-change in society to realise that prisons alone do not work and that these young offenders are also part of our society – or people like us.