



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

Michael Donnellan

EuroPris talks with Michael Donnellan, Director General of Irish Prison Service.

Michael Donnellan was appointed Director General of the Irish Prison Service, by the Minister for Justice and Equality, in December, 2011. Since his appointment Michael has set about delivering on his vision of safer communities through excellence in a prison service built on respect for human dignity. One of the overarching high level objectives underpinning the Prison Service's current Strategic Plan is ensuring Ireland's compliance with domestic and international human rights obligations and best practice. Prior to his appointment as Director General, Michael served as Director of the Probation Service from 2005. Before this he served as Director of two children detention schools in Dublin. He has previous experience in health and social services in Ireland and London.



EuroPris Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?

Michael Donnellan I have been working in the “people business” for the past 40 years. Equality and human rights have always been important to me so therefore it’s no coincidence that I have spent my working life in the helping profession, working in health, social services, child guidance, children’s detention centres, probation and now prisons.

I have chosen to work in the correctional field because, prisoners challenge me their equality and their rights are highly at risk of being undermined. Prisoners being treated fairly will actually lead to fewer victims and a safer community for us all.

How many Prison establishments do you oversee?

As Director General, I oversee 3 campus prisons which encompass 8 prisons. There are also 4 traditional closed, medium security prisons and 2 open centres. The prisons are supported by a number of auxiliary units - the Irish Prison Service College, the Operational Support Group, the Prison Service Escort Corp, and the Building Services Division.

How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Ireland?

On 08 January 2015 there were a total of 4,164 persons in the prison system, 3612 prisoners in custody with a further 552 on various forms of Temporary Release.



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How many staff do you manage?

At the end of December 2014 there were 3,380 people working within the service, including 120 administrative staff based in headquarters.

What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?

That's a very interesting question. I think attributes are far more important than qualifications. Qualifications, while necessary, are relatively easy to gain. We study, we sit exams, and we qualify - it's a relatively simple process. However, having a high standard of education does not necessarily ensure a fair, just and tolerant staff approach towards prisoners. Education is certainly important, but the person themselves and their attributes are, in my experience, central to maintaining positive relationships and regimes. How we treat people is engrained in our person, it is a fiber of our being. It cannot be taught in a class room, you won't read it in any book. There are many attributes required to be a prison officer, determination, commitment, a belief that what you do makes a real difference to the lives of others, patience, you need to be a good listener, vigilance, a forgiving nature, empathy - the list goes on. I think of all the attributes necessary for the role of prison officer, the ability to treat people, colleagues and prisoners alike, with dignity and respect is the most valuable asset any officer can possess.

What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?

My greatest concern, and I am sure this is reflected in prison systems in other jurisdictions, is drugs and other contraband getting into prisons. I believe that drugs are the biggest problem facing society as a whole and this is mirrored in the prison setting. As well as posing challenges for law enforcement and security in our prisons, the drugs problem clearly exasperates the already substantial challenges faced by the support services within our prisons, especially the health, rehabilitation and education services. The challenge is, in my mind, not simply a matter of dealing with the large number of addicted persons being sent to prison, many of who have physical or psychiatric drug related illnesses, but also of dealing with the circulation of illicit drugs and the predominant drug cultures within our prisons. In order for the service to maintain a prison environment that is secure, safe, ordered and law-abiding, we have to meet this issue head on.

What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2014? What challenges you had to overcome?

The biggest challenge I have faced since becoming Director General is the reduction of prison numbers. When I began my tenure in December 2011 there were 5,152 prisoners in the system and as mentioned earlier that figure is now down to 4,164 a reduction of almost 1,000 prisoners. It hasn't been an easy task but the benefits to staff and prisoners in terms of what we can achieve and the services we can now provide to prisoners are immense.



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What are the challenges for your service this year?

2015, I have no doubt will provide many challenges, as each year does. The current economic climate, while improving, is still a very difficult adversary.

Preventing drugs and contraband getting into the prison system also presents a significant challenge and requires a careful balancing act between providing the best service available to prisoners through maintaining family links while ensuring the security of the prison system is not exposed to unnecessary risk. Another major challenge for the prison system and this is not one that can be achieved without a determined, focused input from not only the prison service, but by a range of services and agencies in Ireland, is the challenge of breaking the cycle of crime. 60% of male children with a parent in prison will end up in prison themselves. If we are to succeed as a prison service we must play our part in breaking this vicious, self-destructive cycle.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?

As I mentioned previously, I think the single biggest challenge facing all prison and correctional services, not just in Europe but across the world, is drugs. The challenge is complex and is not solely restricted to preventing illicit drugs from entering the prison setting. The drugs issue also includes dealing effectively with the individual needs of problematic drug users and reducing the harm that drug users cause to themselves and others. I see the biggest challenge as showing prisoners that drugs are not the answer and that that drugs create infinitely more problems than they solve. If we can do that then we will have achieved something truly remarkable.

What benefits do you see being linked as a Member to an organisation such as EuroPris?

The benefits to being linked to EuroPris are wide-ranging. The organisation provides a platform to share knowledge and experience and allows us to look at other jurisdictions to see if there is a better way of doing things. It also allows us to measure our successes and failures and provides a host of statistical data to study and research. By opening debates and encouraging discussion, EuroPris stimulates ideas and thinking by facilitating channels of dialogue that may otherwise be unavailable. In my experience, the network also sees friendships and bonds formed which can last a lifetime.

Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?

Yes, the Irish Prison Service actively engages with a wide and diverse group of NGO's and Charities. In particular, I recognise the critical need to promote and sustain strong partnerships with civil society in general as we are dealing with some complex issues such as drug abuse and crime that undermine the fabric of Irish society. The active involvement of civil society in our prisons, by which I mean NGOs, addiction groups, community groups, minority representative groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations and many others, is essential to help us achieve the prison service's strategic objectives. These groups also play a key role in supporting prisoners and ex-prisoners to reintegrate into society and engaging actively with them brings us a broad range of expertise, knowledge, resources and experience that we may otherwise not have access to. I also strongly feel that prisons need to move from being closed 'state secrets' into institutions in the public domain. One of the problems with the high walls that keep prisoners in secure custody is that they



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also keep the public out. We need to provide more information about ourselves and the work we do and welcome people in from outside our organisation. Benefits from taking this approach also come to prisons, prison staff, and the wider community. For example, prisoners benefit because people who see them as fellow-citizens are visiting the prison voluntarily, not because it is a professional and paid duty; prison staff benefit because their environment is normalised by the presence of outside groups and they too can see that they are not cut off from the community outside; and the community benefits because knowledge about the reality of prison life and what prisons are and are not will be disseminated. In short, civil society involvement is a key element of our prison reform process. Without support from bodies outside the prison system, reform of the service is unlikely to be sustainable.

What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?

I suppose the greatest personal satisfaction I gain from my work is the sense that I make a difference, that I affect positive change in people's lives, that I help people to see that they can choose a different path in life. That through education and training prisoners can see that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that there are good people willing to help them along the way. On the reverse side I would say the greatest disappointment connected to my work is that we cannot save everyone, there are people who return to crime, to drug use and it saddens me to see a life wasted, more victims hurt, a chance missed or a life lost because a person, for whatever reason, couldn't see a better way or was afraid to ask for a helping hand.

If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?

It is difficult to pick just one, I would hope to be remembered as the Director General who helped eradicate slopping out and eliminated overcrowding, and who continued the battle against drugs in prison. But if I have to pick just one, I would like to be remembered as the Director General who challenged the prevailing culture within the prison organisation. The Director General who moved the organisation away from a culture of self interest, to an organisation which recognises that the continuous and relentless pursuit of respecting human rights and treating people with dignity and respect is in everyone's best interest.