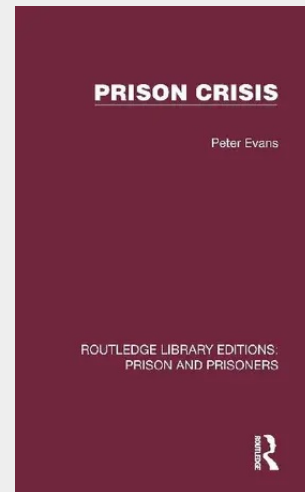


Prison Crisis

'So far we have successfully avoided loss of life during serious disturbances but if the present trend continues there will be a serious loss of control... In such circumstances there is a probability of both staff and prisoners being killed.' This dramatic warning, given by the prison governors to the Labour Home Secretary, Mr Merlyn Rees, stimulated the setting up of the May Committee in 1978. That Committee then reported and revealed how dangerously explosive the prison system had become. The time was exactly right therefore for a book like Prison Crisis, originally published in 1980, to draw together all of the issues to provide an agenda for public and politicians to use this best chance in one hundred years for a major reform of the prison system. One issue above all symbolises those which affect the prison system and the prison service, and of course the prisoners themselves; for it exposes why the system is dangerously close to breakdown:- 'The extent of prison overcrowding is a national disgrace. In 1978, for the first time, as many as 16,000 inmates in some of the most primitive of Britain's prisons were forced to live two or three to a cell which the Victorians had built to hold one. They have not even washbasins in their cells, let alone lavatories... Sometime prisoners are locked in together for twenty-three hours out of twenty-four, sleeping, smoking eating, urinating and defecating without privacy in sickening sight, smell and sound of each other.' The author, who had been Home Affairs Correspondent of The Times for ten years, raises, as Sir Robert Marks puts it in his Foreword, 'all sorts of issues which could and should be of great interest to a caring public' and which now demand decision and action: how best to hold the top-security prisoners, including terrorists, how prisons are often forced, with psychiatric cases, to do the job of hospitals; 'the academies of crime', detention centres and borstals; the rise in female, and particularly juvenile crime; violence in prisons and riot control; the prisoners' rights movement; discontent among prison officers not just over pay but over the status of their job and the importance of their role in re-educating prisoners; the governors' position of responsibility without power; the low political priority given by Government. Finally, in a chapter aptly called 'Rescuing the Prisons', Peter Evans conducts a wide-ranging, well informed and radical debate on what, at different levels, needed to be done to make a system rooted in the nineteenth century fit for the twenty-first century and still retain the sense that prisons are above all a moral issue.

In Prison Crisis, originally published in 1980, Peter Evans draws together all of the issues of the time to provide an agenda for public and politicians to use this best chance in one hundred years for a major reform of the prison system.



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