**Tribute to General Lord David Ramsbotham**

After the long, distinguished career in the army that Sir Patrick has so eloquently described, it would not have been unreasonable for the recently retired David Ramsbotham to take things a little easier.

But, here in Whitehall, wheels were turning. Stephen Tumin, the Chief Inspector of Prisons had retired, a successor was urgently sought and the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, wanted someone who would back his tough on crime policies. Who then could be better, it was suggested, than a recently retired general called Rambo?

And so, in December 1995, he began in the role that was redefine the next 25 years of his working life.

If, however, Michael Howard thought he was getting a stooge, he was in for a nasty shock. David was a Trojan horse. In his immaculate double-breasted suits, his regimental tie and his polished shoes he looked and sounded like a pillar of the establishment. But he became, both as chief inspector and in his time in the House of Lords, a thorn in the side of successive governments.

Within days, he set the tone for his tenure as chief inspector, leading his team into Holloway Women’s Prison and then, almost immediately, leading them, out again - refusing to continue with the inspection until something was done about the appalling squalor and the shocking treatment of women in the prison.

And I won’t be the only person here who can remember dozing with the Today programme on in the background, only to be brought sharply to attention by David’s outraged voice, piercing the airwaves, as he reported, in disbelief, on the horrors he had found in another jail.

Under his leadership the inspectorate found a new voice, holding the powerful to account for their inability to protect the weak. He was ashamed of what he often found, adamant that the treatment of prisoners was a direct measure of our civilisation.

During his tenure, David and his team devised the four tests for measuring the health of a jail – Safety, Respect, Purposeful Activity and Rehabilitation. 24 years later, these remain the gold standard by which the inspectorate continues to judge prisons.

He could, undoubtedly, be tough on governors, and his legendary debriefs to senior leaders, theatrically staged in the prison chapel, were a blunt assessment of the state of the jail. But he also had enormous admiration and sympathy for people who worked in prisons. He made a point of recognising the often-dangerous circumstances in which they worked, and he resented the fact that they didn’t get the public recognition they deserved.

He also understood the constraints that were put on governors by a stifling bureaucracy and a chronic lack of money.

But his most stinging criticism was reserved for senior prison service officials or ministers, particularly when he felt they were hiding behind more junior staff, rather than taking responsibility for their own failure to act.

Having retired from the inspectorate he continued to play an active interest in all things penal and when he entered the House of Lords, as a crossbencher, he made the improving the treatment of those locked up by the state, his mission. I cannot resist reading a little bit of his maiden speech, made just days after his arrival in the house.

“I hear again the ringing tones of my prep school cricket master warning me quite correctly that, if I did not learn to play myself in before trying to hit every ball for six, I would never make a batsman. I realise that I have not given myself much time to play myself in to the ways of this House—to which I feel immensely honoured to have been appointed—but, before the inevitable rattle of ball on stumps, I wonder whether I could be allowed to explain my reasons for my rashness.”

He went on to talk, as he did so many times, about prisons, but he also frequently intervened in debates about both the military and the health service.

In the Lords, as everywhere else, he was unfailingly polite, but he could also be icily direct, most memorably in his valedictory message to a minister:

“He will be remembered and blamed for the havoc that he has wrought, in less than three years, on the entire criminal justice system, which will take years to resolve. Only those who fear the truth need to try to suppress it,”

David was remarkably generous with his time. He sat on the all-party parliamentary groups on penal affairs, speech and language, and learning and skills. But he also dedicated himself to an astonishing number of organisations to which he was a patron or trustee.

These included: Koestler Awards, the Howard League, the National Association of Ex-offenders, the Prison Advice and Care Trust, the Institute for Food, Brain and Behaviour, Prisoners Abroad, the Prisoners Education Trust, the Prisoners Advice Service, the Zahid Mubarek Trust, Skillforce, Acquired Brain Injury Network, the Make Justice Work Campaign, the St Giles Trust, Safe Ground, the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, the African Prisons Project and PTSD Resolution Providing Support for Veterans. And, apologies, there are probably more that I have missed.

He also campaigned successfully for changes to the use of physical restraint after a series of deaths in custody.

Many here will have been lucky enough to have been taken for tea or lunch with David at the House of Lords. Although walking with him through parliament took ages, because everybody knew him and wanted to stop to say a few words.

I can still hear his voice ringing out across the tearoom, “PANT! People are not things!”

Although he was confident that prisons were in a better state by the end of his term as chief inspector, sadly he recognised that many failings remained. I remember bumping into him in 2019 after a terrible report on Feltham YOI had just been published. He said: “Before you read this one, read mine from 1998”. The two were depressingly similar with whole sections that were practically interchangeable.

In his last annual report, David worried because the prison population had grown to 55k, it is now at a staggering 88k and projected to reach 100k by the end of the decade. The cost of imprisonment has gone up, but the outcomes are still the same with too many prisoners locked away without the work, training or education that will make them less likely to reoffend when they come out.

Outside of the reactive political cycle, David fought to force the debate about whom we lock up, for how long, and what we want to happen to them when they are in prison.

When David died there was an outpouring of sadness and affection, not just from commentators and organisations with which he’d worked – but also people often in more lowly jobs who described his extraordinary kindness.

Perhaps my favourite amongst hundreds of comments was one I saw on twitter which said:

“David Ramsbotham gave a lecture at my uni. I only went to keep my friend company. It literally changed my life, and I joined the prison service. He was truly inspirational!

Above all, David gave a voice to those had been forgotten or ignored – so, I will give the final word to an ex-prisoner who said of David,

“He was a man who made a lot of difference to prisoners – the world is indeed diminished by the passing of this great man.”