

'Change, evolve, learn'

The path to rehabilitation is available ... but other issues more of a priority for the Conservative party



Elliot Tyler

I have known Romford's Member of Parliament, Andrew Rosindell, for countless years, having encountered him at events held in his East London constituency, which happens to be where I was born and educated. Mr Rosindell, a politician with frontbench and backbench experience, has held a multitude of roles during his political career, including that of Shadow Minister for Home Affairs, Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Party, and Opposition Whip. Since his election in 2001, the MP has become known for his waistcoat-wearing dog, for being a flag aficionado, and his strong views on Brexit. He is considered an influential figure in his party, and that is why, on this windy Friday, I have chosen to talk to him about the somewhat overlooked topic of criminal records and the rehabilitation of offenders.



Andrew Rosindell: "For anybody who has genuinely moved on from their one mistake, there should be a pathway to get back to normal life and to be treated as a normal person."

There is not a universally agreed definition of the word 'crime', according to the Open University. The first known use of the word 'crime', which is derived from the Latin for 'accusation', occurred in the High Middle Ages. I ask Mr Rosindell whether he will attempt to provide a modern and current definition. 'A criminal is, in my view, somebody who has broken the law of peace by harming another.' I ask that he elaborates, and he willingly obliges. 'They may have harmed another, taken something that is not theirs, or created misery at the expense of somebody else.'

'There should be a pathway,' he insists, 'For anybody who has genuinely moved on from their one mistake, there should be a pathway to get back to normal life and to be treated as a normal person.' I ask him if he thinks there are any exceptions to this idea, and he

responds. 'There are people who have committed heinous crimes, and it does depend on the level of crime and the type of people that have been affected by that crime. There are bad people in this world - lots of people with bad intentions - and no matter how hard you try with them, they have got traits which make them want to do bad things.'

The conversation continues onto the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, which, at the time of the interview, was being 'looked at' by the Justice Secretary, The Rt Hon Robert Buckland. Government reforms have since, as of September 2020, been revealed in a White Paper (which is, essentially, an official proposal), entitled 'A Smarter Approach to Sentencing', which speaks of enabling criminal sentences of over four years to become 'spent' (removed from a criminal record check), but excluding offences classified as 'serious sexual, violent or terrorist'. Mr Rosindell says he has not studied the Act before, but tells me he believes that 'human beings can change, evolve, learn and be affected by their surroundings.' He recalls a number of former offenders who have come to him in the past, explaining that, 'It's not something that happens that often, but when it does I always help these people to get support, such as jobs and housing.'

In a number of countries and regions there are creative methods employed when it comes to the matter of criminal records. Christopher Stacey, the co-director of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust in 2014 which placed emphasis on the French concept of 'judicial rehabilitation'. In many cases (4,156 in 2014), this results in the removal of a criminal conviction from a person's record, with the further possibility of a 'rehabilitation certificate' being issued. 'I think the certificate of rehabilitation is a great idea, and it sounds like the kind of thing we should consider in this country,' Andrew Rosindell says. He is of the opinion that it gives people a 'pathway', thus making it 'a good idea'. Nonetheless, he does not consider the concept to be fool proof. 'The problem we have is that this panel could decide to issue a certificate, but that person could go off and break the law, which is a worry that nobody wants.' There must be a 'triple-lock' he suggests, to ensure a correct process takes place. 'It would be a way to see a light at the end of the tunnel, and I am cautious to make sure it is done in a way that protects the public,' the MP concludes.

Finally, I ask him if he feels the Conservative Party, which he has represented wholeheartedly since his election as a local councillor thirty years ago, has rehabilitation and the future of ex-offenders on the agenda. 'It is about doing practical things that will work,' he says, 'and I think the Conservatives should be leading on this.' But he says there are other 'major issues' that the party has been dealing with, and this particular issue has been 'on the back burner' in the meantime.

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Outside View

A life with animals



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Paul Sullivan

It will soon be Christmas. As you may have gathered, I am a great lover of animals and it is sad that at this time of year people buy cats, dogs and other animals to give away as presents, often to children. Very soon comes the realisation that looking after an animal is hard work; as the first priority must always be the animal's welfare - whether it be food or healthcare.

There is a lot wrong with the prison system, but it is heartening to hear of many establishments that have their residents working with animals; whether it be raising them, such as chickens, producing food from them, such as honey from bees, or rehabilitating them, such as dogs. There are many birds of prey centres in prisons across the country bringing inspiration to the people in the prisons who work with them and we have been lucky enough to feature some in our pages.

I grew up with animals - cats, guinea pigs and budgies. They all brought their own personalities and, when they passed, equal grief. Many people do not understand the connection people can have with animals. I have always liked cows but have an ongoing fear of horses; however have determined that next year, Covid-willing, I am going to visit a horse sanctuary and overcome that fear. I will tell you all about it when it happens. Strangely, I am OK with donkeys and used to go to the Donkey Sanctuary at Seaton in Devon; very relaxing to stand with a donkey resting its head on your shoulder, a kind of silent communication.

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In nearly 40 years of marriage my wife and I have always had cats in the family. Each one has been rescued or was a captured feral cat. Some were affectionate lap-cats who loved nothing more than to snuggle under the bedclothes for a cuddle. Others, especially the feral cats, took longer to appreciate a warm home and lashings of their favourite food and treats, but with time and space they come around; even if they will never be lap-cats. Each cat has its own personality and communication, and is proof, to me anyway, that they are sentient and aware - a reason they should never be harmed. Amazingly, with all the cats (about 12) I have never been deliberately scratched or bitten, even when wrestling them into the carrier to visit the vet.

At the end of October there was even a special memorial service at Southwark Cathedral for a cat, Doorkins, who moved in one day twelve years ago and made her home there, allowing the Dean and others to feed and look after her. People from around the world, after they heard about her, ensured a visit to the Cathedral to meet her. Her remains were buried in the Cathedral churchyard opposite the West Door, where she made her first entrance.

One of my other favourite animals is the wolf. I was lucky enough, a few years ago, to adopt Mai, a beautiful grey wolf, at the UK Wolf Conservation Trust. Her name means 'Coyote' in the Navajo language. Mai was born in 2006 and arrived with her sister Mosi from Dartmoor Wildlife Park later that year. She is an impressive self-assured wolf with a stunning thick and luxuriant silvery grey coat. She enjoys being around people and is known for her very gentle nature, and still enjoys going on walks and socialising with her handlers even though she is getting old now, for a wolf, and is separated from the pack - but her three pups; Nuka, Tala and Tundra have grown up to become the new generation of wolf ambassadors.

They used to allow members to go to their centre near Reading and meet the wolves and even go for walks with them. The money raised helped the Trust rescue and conserve wolves. Unfortunately, one of the more ignorant members of society thought it would be a good idea to open the gates one night to let them escape. Fortunately, only one set off to find freedom. There was general panic, and police arrived armed to the teeth ready to 'shoot on sight'. By good fortune, one of the ladies who worked at the Trust found the wolf first, put a collar and lead on and walked him back home. The result was; however, the Trust lost their zoo licence and now nobody is allowed to go and meet the wolves and their income is slashed. I do still have a tuft of her hair though.

Two years ago, I had the honour of visiting the Tower of London to talk to Chris Skaithe, the Raven Master, and meet some of the birds. They are not as big as I expected but are very intelligent. A new addition to the family was Poppy, who came up to say hello and allowed me to take photographs of her. I think animals understand when a human is no threat and, within reason, will come and communicate. I wrote a few months ago about the foxes that visit my garden and completely ignore my presence - although they are not so popular at the moment as they have taken to excavating my newly laid lawn!