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RAISING THE TITAN

The controversial 'super prison' concept has returned to government thinking, but will it get further than the previous administration's Titans?

●● If you live long enough, you get to see everything twice," so the saying goes. When it comes to prison building, it seems you don't have to live very long at all.

In January, the Ministry of Justice announced it is undertaking a feasibility study into building a new prison, capable of holding up to 2,000 people. The idea is similar to plans scrapped by the previous government in 2009 for so-called Titan prisons, which would have been able to incarcerate 2,500 prisoners at a time.

The justice department admits it is only in the very early stages of its plans at the moment and has not considered how a new 'super prison' might be funded. But ministers may find efforts to build jails capable of holding so many prisoners have far larger roadblocks in their way than whether or not to use private finance.

"There were clearly concerns about the effectiveness of the previous government's plans for 'super prisons' and these will need to be addressed as part of the feasibility study," explains Jonathan Cripps, partner at law firm Stephenson Harwood.

Given that the previous government was forced to shelve its plans for Titan prisons largely because of opposition from experts and the public, it is hard to see what might have changed in the last six years. Then-Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, warned of: "The Titans – 2,500-strong prison complexes, flying in the face of our, and others', evidence that smaller prisons work better than large ones."

Experts suggest that around 500 places is the highest number at which prisons can work effectively before essentially becoming 'warehouses' – which is how the previous shadow minister Dominic Grieve described the Titans.

"Small community prisons tend to be safer and better at reducing reoffending than huge anonymous establishments," adds Juliet Lyon, director of the Prison Reform Trust.

That, of course, goes to the heart of the question around the government's decision to build prisons at all.

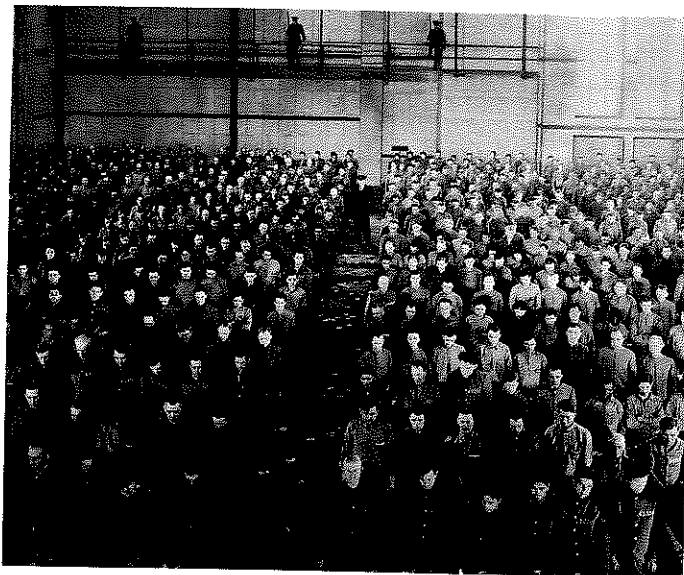
The bare figures make a compelling case for new large-scale prisons. According to the Ministry of Justice, the current prison population is near capacity at 83,632. Predictions suggest the system will reach capacity in just six years' time unless something is done.

Added to that is the fact that the existing estate is in desperate need of an overhaul. "The prison estate has a number of prisons that are known to be past the point of economic repair, and are incapable of meeting current social and political objectives," says Jim Crossman, director at consultancy Currie & Brown. "They have been like this for 15 years or more across successive governments."

So it's little wonder that 'super prisons' might look compelling because of the economies of scale involved. "You get all prisoners grouped into one place, which can be managed more efficiently," Crossman explains.

However, the previous Justice Secretary, Ken Clarke, had pledged to introduce a 'rehabilitation revolution' when he arrived in office and set about getting offenders out of prison and doing more work in the community.

His replacement, Chris Grayling, has long been considered as taking a more hard-line approach. Reoffending rates have remained stubbornly high, which has only added fuel to accusations that non-custodial sentences are 'soft' options.



"To be contemplating building new prisons seems to be an indictment of the 'rehabilitation revolution'," says one lawyer.

"While it produces a very cost-efficient prisoner-place model, it creates social problems that defeat stated political objectives," agrees Crossman. These problems often centre around prisoners being taken a long way from their social network of friends and family, who can help them reintegrate into society on leaving prison.

Lyon calls on the government to spend more money on "crime prevention, healthcare and community solutions to crime", which have proven to be cheaper – and more successful – alternatives to prison.

So the question is whether the government can convince opponents that things have changed sufficiently since 2009 to suggest that larger prisons can now be successful at rehabilitation.

Perhaps the one difference in the prisons sector today is the government's drive to develop payment by results contracts with providers. This model ensures contractors are paid in relation to the reductions in reoffending that they achieve.

But using that model to build a massive new building could prove difficult. "It would be quite ambitious," says Cripps. "It's difficult to see how it would work with a funder who has spent significant sums to get a major piece of infrastructure in place. The payment by results model really works better for short term projects where results can be evidenced fairly quickly and where the capital outlay is minimal."

Most agree that the most likely scenario is that the latest feasibility study into 'super prisons' will reach the same conclusions as the previous government, and the whole enterprise will be quietly scrapped in favour of a series of smaller prisons being built.

"I don't think [super prisons] are going to run," concludes Crossman. "They cut too far across the stated aim of social rehabilitation from both Labour and Conservatives." **PB**