

The unfortunate silencing of Alex Cavendish

What obligation does a convicted sex offender have to reveal his true identity? A storm over the issue has arisen in the world of prison blogging.

One of the best criminal justice blogs on the internet is [Prison UK](#). Over the last 3 years it has described the life of prisoners in British prisons with a remarkable and unprecedented vividness. Anyone wanting to know about the realities of prison life should read it. I have even recommended it as preparation for clients expecting to receive a prison sentence: one of the most widely read posts (because it was [eventually published in Metro](#)) was about what to pack for somebody who is expecting to go to prison (flip-flops for the showers, earplugs and headphones being top of the list). If you want to know about food in prison, illness in prison, sex in prison, old men in prison, drugs in prison, suicide in prison and death in prison the blog has covered all those subjects superbly.

The writer of the blog called himself Alex Cavendish. On the blog he described himself thus:

“Until 2014 a serving prisoner who had a lot of experience as an Insider, a prisoner who has the job of supporting and advising other prisoners, particularly those who are new to the prison system. He also trained as a peer mentor and worked extensively in prison education departments to help other prisoners improve their literacy skills. He served his sentence in B-cats, C-cats and a D-cat (open prison).”

He was also a prolific tweeter under the name @prisonuk, and was increasingly called upon to comment on prisons in the wider media. One particularly useful thing he has done over the last few months is to document and publicise various prison disturbances and riots that might otherwise have received no, or at least only heavily censored and occasionally misleading official publicity. Assuming, as I do, that he has not just made it all up, the only way he could have done this is by having access to “sources” within the prisons. Presumably these have been either prisoners themselves, prisoners’ families or prison officers.

@prisonuk never revealed what crime it was that got him sent to prison. I have followed him on Twitter and exchanged direct messages with him and I never asked. It seemed to me largely irrelevant. He tweeted and wrote about prison conditions, and mostly, it seemed, blogged from his own experience. If you are going to report on what it is like to serve time in prison then the chances are high that you have quite a few dark secrets. I admit that I was intrigued enough to google his name once or twice: nothing came up about what he was sent to prison for. It occurred to me that he might be writing under a pseudonym. I suppose, if someone had put me on the spot I would have guessed that his crime was either fraud or sex. As it happened no-one did.

Last week Cavendish was “outed” as a sex offender. His exposé was (on his own description) a prisoner “doing life with a 24 year tariff” with a twitter account called @prison_diaries, also known as “The Lifer.” Cavendish, it turns out, is in fact Mark (although often known as Alex) Standish, who was convicted in 2012 of historic sex offences against a teenage boy. Mr Standish was a teacher at Crookham Court School in the 1980s. The case has an unusual history in that before he was himself convicted, he had informed both the police and the Department of Education of a culture of child abuse within the school, and had even written a book about it (which I have not read) called *Suffer the Little Children*. He had also assisted Esther Rantzen who produced a *That’s Life* expose of the school, and even given evidence for the prosecution at the trial of other teachers who were convicted of abuse.

Many years later, a former pupil called Andy Hudson (he has waived his right to anonymity) complained that Mr Standish had in fact sexually abused him over a period of about a year. There was a trial and Standish was convicted. The judge sentenced him to 4 years in prison. Presumably he was released after serving half his sentence, and was thus able to start his blog in 2014.

Standish attempted to appeal his conviction. In the absence of fresh evidence an appeal against conviction is generally only possible if there has been some legal error at the trial. His argument, [as far as I can make it out from press reports](#), was that it was unfair to prosecute him 20 years after the event. Unsurprisingly that failed. In recent years the Court of Appeal has invariably turned down appeals based on the argument that the mere passage of time has rendered a trial unfair. Despite being described in the press as a “second” appeal, in reality I think that what happened is that he was initially refused/leave to appeal on the papers alone by a single judge, and he then exercised his right to argue the point in front of the full court. Far from being a “second” appeal, it may well be that he has not had any appeal at all because he has been refused leave both by a single judge and by the full court.

He now claims that there is in fact fresh evidence and before he left Twitter he announced that he is again intending to appeal against his conviction.

Whether there is anything in this appeal remains to be seen. For the time being he remains a convicted sex offender, and the fact that he concealed his identity while commenting on prison matters has enraged many people.

There is of course an obvious difficulty with an anonymous prisoner, probably a murderer serving a sentence of life imprisonment, taking the moral high ground on an issue like this. Be that as it may, many others – while not necessarily

supporting The Lifer's methods – have been highly critical of what they have described as Standish's "deception."

Two of the most critical have also been former prisoners who blog and tweet on penal affairs, Ben Gunn and Penny Mellor. Both are serious voices who deserve attention, both have served time in prison, Gunn for murder (committed when he was a child), Mellor for conspiracy to abduct a child to Ireland. Unlike Standish, and it is very much to their credit, neither has attempted to conceal their identity.

Gunn, who has a well-deserved reputation for blunt and fearless speaking has accused Standish of lying and deceit. He's not going to like this blog because, as he put it: "*The professionals defending the dangerous deceit of @prisonuk is truly vomitous.*"

Mellor has [gone into more detail on her blog](#):

In the last 48 hours, a man who represented so many views on prison reform, a trusted voice, feted in certain quarters was 'outed' on social media as being a convicted child sex offender. Along with many others I was surprised at this revelation, not that he was a convicted sex offender, but that he had not told anyone what he had been convicted of. It should not matter, however it does, it does for many reasons, some of which are tied up in the complexities of prison politics.

Although Gunn says the problem is not the crime but the deceit, for Mellor the nature of the crime that Standish did not reveal certainly is a problem:

"If you happen to have been convicted of a child sex offence ..., you can pretty much guarantee that you are not going to be safe in prison unless you spend all your time in segregation. Even the convicted sex offenders have their pecking order, a rapist being higher up the food chain than the paedophile. The SO who downloads child pornographers being 'better' than the child molester etc.

Should you find out that somebody is a convicted child sex offender and you choose to engage with them, you do so at your own peril. Guilty by association. You are literally putting your life at risk. It is considered to be a betrayal of unwritten prison rules if you do befriend a 'nonce'. However, if you know then at least you can make an informed choice. A choice that was removed on social media because Alex did not tell anyone.

... [A]ny inmate who has been conversing with a 'nonce' privately or publicly via social media ran the risk of coming to harm themselves because of those comms. The fact they did not know he was a convicted sex offender is irrelevant in HMP. This is where the betrayal ex con reformists talk about becomes polarised."

Well I'm sorry, I don't accept this. It seems to be bringing the dubious ethics of the prison yard into ordinary life. It is presumably because of the unwritten rule that no "decent" murderer or robber should ever associate with a "nonce" that he felt obliged to use a pseudonym in the first place, and that he has now closed his Twitter account. Bad things happen to known sex offenders.

Nor do I accept the deception argument. In what sense is using a pseudonym a "deception"? No-one was deceived into talking to Standish, or if they were they deceived themselves. He never said what his crime was. Anyone who communicated with him – I assume that includes both Gunn and Mellor – and was worried about it, ought to have realised that there was at least a fair chance that he was a sex offender. If he was not a sex offender he could equally well have been a blackmailer or a con-man. Of course, the position would have been different if he had lied about his conviction. As far as I know he never did.

The other point that Mellor makes, what she calls "the crux of the matter" is this:

"Alex claims to have been receiving information from the 'inside'. This could mean prison officers, governors or inmates with illegal phones. You may all be thinking 'so what' – Alex is a convicted sex offender, we have no way of finding out if he also has a SOPO (Sexual Offences Prevention Order) which precludes him from having any contact with minors it may also include other orders relating to whom he is allowed contact with, such as vulnerable people. Alex was in contact with many people, some of whom may well be young people incarcerated in young offenders units, some of whom have anon accounts on Twitter and may well be under 18, some of whom may be on license with a SOPO for sex offence themselves. All of this puts any whistleblowers he was in contact with at risk. Any breach of an order which may or may not be in place allows those in authority to examine his electronics if they believe he is in breach of any conditions that have been placed on him."

This crux of her argument doesn't hold up either. As she herself says, "*We have no way of finding out*"

If he is the subject of a sexual offences prevention order, if it prohibits communication with any minors, if he is in contact with them, if they have been using illicit mobile phones, and so on. If he has breached a court order, or a licence condition, then no doubt the authorities will take action but we have no idea whether he has. If he was knowingly communicating by means of illegal phones in prison that would be a serious offence irrespective of the nature of his original crime. It is all a huge pile of speculation.

On his release Standish could have chosen a life of quiet obscurity. Instead he chose to use his prison experience to bring home the scale of the prison crisis to a wider public. Like Ben Gunn and Penny Mellor he was very good at it. If you are going to reform prisons, or even if you just want to know about what goes on inside them, it makes sense to listen to prisoners and ex-prisoners. Most of them will be bad people, or people who have done bad and sometimes terrible things. That is often why they are, or have been, in prison. Prison UK was one of the most articulate ex-prisoners and his silencing is bad news for prison reform.