



# How to Win the War on Gangs

**A Talk to Kingdom of Mongrel Mob Members  
by Eagles Foundation Chair, John Wareham**

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**I was invited to talk to you today about who I am, what I've learned, and how you and I and the Eagles Foundation might work together to resolve current Kiwi gang and prison recidivism issues, so here goes . . . .**

I was born in New Zealand, arriving in good health, but cursed with a debilitating stutter. I spent my first twenty-nine years growing up in Wellington. My father played on the left-wing for the Wellington representative rugby team for five years. After that he created a catering firm that cornered and held eighty percent of the local market for thirty years. My mother, also a keen athlete, captained a senior Wellington basketball team.

They split up when I was five, and I became what the police called a juvenile, juvenile-delinquent. After getting exorcised from the Marist Brothers School, I attended the public primary school in Newtown, nowadays trendy location, but back then a slum suburb. After that, hoping that five years there might secure my rebel bent, I was sent away to become a boarder at Palmerston North Boys High School.

Given my nasty stutter, upon leaving school, I was assigned a full-time job as a back room clerk in a bank. The whole situation was so depressing that I attempted suicide. Close but no cigar. I enrolled as a part-time accounting and economics student at Victoria University of Wellington. My career was brief and varied: I subsequently worked as an accountant for an ad agency, an import firm, a public accounting practice, then a television rental company. Happily I completed my degree and got serious about life. I 'fixed' my stutter and became a national oratory and debating champion. At age 26 I established Wellington's first executive leadership selection and development firm, which I then expanded to Auckland and Christchurch, then in 1970 to Sydney and Melbourne, and in 1977 to New York, where I lived and worked for the next thirty-eight years.

To take my first ride to my office in the Pan Am building, I vividly remember jamming onto a standing-room-only New York subway train at 8:00: AM on a steamy Monday at the 86<sup>th</sup> St. station. As the doors closed behind me and the train rock-and-rolled down the track, I pitched my writhing self into a circle of humanity, and grabbed the sturdy chrome pole attached to the roof and the floor. Then I glanced at the dozen or so lurching strangers wrapped around the same shaft; I never forgot that multi-colored circle of Asians, African Americans, Caucasians, and Semites. So *this* was New York. I remember also their smiles and startled looks, when, as perhaps only a naïve Kiwi might dare to do, I engaged them with a happy exclamation, "Well, at least we're all hanging on the same pole!"

I'm sharing this story for a reason, as we'll soon see.

I coached New York headquartered corporate chiefs and their teams. Then in 1995, my life took a turn. A couple of self-help books I'd written attracted attention, and I was invited to teach, one day a week, an inmate class on New York's notorious Rikers Island, the world's largest penal colony. Because I'd be working as an unpaid volunteer, I was able to

create my own class within the program. Drawing upon my prior issues, I decided to begin by teaching public speaking and communication.

## A Man from Mars

As on that subway train, I entered my first Rikers class like the Man from Mars. The first thing I noted was the color of the inmates. Only three of thirty-six were White. The others were mostly African-American with a sprinkling of Hispanic. Yikes. Something was surely wrong with this picture. I also soon discovered that a depressing eighty percent of inmates who graduated that program were rearrested and returned to Rikers within 60 days of their release. Yikes again. I figured that unless I could find a way to create a program to dramatically reduce that staggering recidivism rate, I should return to the planet of my financially rewarding corporate clients.

In fact, I stayed on for twenty years, and wound up dedicating more than half my time to teaching and developing my prison class, always as an unpaid volunteer. To be honest, my reward was a never ending learning curve. And, as you might imagine, I wound up with unique wealth of knowledge at both ends of the social spectrum.

Specifically I learned at Rikers that:

- virtually everyone who showed up in my class was intelligent, keen to learn, outwardly rebellious and opinionated, but in fact, inquiring and open-minded;
- racism, injustice and institutional bias were pervasive;
- Malcolm X was right when he said, “if you’re a black man living in America, and you’re not angry, you don’t understand what’s happening;”
- most of my class had been incarcerated either as a result of doing drugs or of one way or another dealing drugs;
- but these guys did *not* have a drug *problem*—they had a drug *solution*.

I also figured that there had to be a way to help them sidestep these social quicksands, win the respect they’d been denied, and create the decent, productive lives they yearned for.

Happily I already knew is that change is a *process*. And that it happens when we truly understand our particular predicament and can begin to see a way out of it. The predicament of Rikers inmates was *not* that they were incarcerated. Their predicament was that they kept coming back to jail—the *syndrome of serial incarceration*.

I knew that finger-pointing, pontificating officials never reformed me. And since these guys in my class were serial offenders, it wasn’t working for them, either.

What *does* work, are new ideas that we can process. First, we need to recognize the mistaken beliefs that result in serial incarceration. Then, without too much effort, we can choose to embrace the liberating beliefs that end that syndrome.

As the Man from Mars, I knew that in this situation, I was the student and the inmates were my teachers. So I decided to bring to the table a set of big and often contentious ideas for discussion, express no personal view, and merely keep the conversations respectful and focused. We did this via discussion papers, public speaking and parliamentary debating, creating poetry, and seeing and discussing movies.

Happily it worked. Lives were changed and two graduates of my class, Kenny Johnson and Joe Roberts, and I formed the Eagles Foundation to help at-risk youth. Very soon, I successfully advocated for both of them to be appointed to paid, full time jobs

teaching Rikers inmates. As African-Americans with serious prior rap-sheets, the Eagles principles that Kenny and Joe shared won immediate and lasting respect, and changed countless inmate lives.

A decade later, after creating, with the unstinting help of Rikers inmates, our Eagles program, I was invited to teach mostly murderers and violent felons in Upstate New York maximum-security prisons. This proved an even greater learning experience. So much so that during my 10 year stint there, the recidivism rate for Eagles graduates fell into single digits.

If you'd like to know exactly what were the series of big ideas that resulted in this happy outcome, check out our podcast series *The Breakout Plan*, which now has listeners worldwide in more than 400 cities. Right now, however, let me share the first of two brief stories that affected every inmate of every stripe, colour and creed—and which might just change your lives, too.

### **The King of the World and the Man in the Cask**

Back in 300 BC, having conquered known world, Alexander the Great sent for the philosopher and former slave Diogenes, who had turned his back on material possessions, and, at that time, clad in rags, lived in a barrel in Athens Greece.

Unimpressed, Diogenes replied, “If that fellow has a mind to be acquainted with me, let him come hither, for I shall always think Athens as far distance from Macedon as Macedon is from Athens.”

So Alexander the Great made that trek. Together with his entourage, they surrounded Diogenes as he lay in his open barrel. “I am Alexander the Great, conqueror and now King of the world,” said Alexander to Diogenes. “Your reputation is well known to me and I greatly admire your philosophies. So, I have come to grant you anything you desire, anything at all.”

Diogenes reply was one for the ages: “Could you kindly stand out of my sunlight.”

Amazed by a response that he'd heard from no citizen of any country, Alexander drew a deep breath and asked, “Wherever are you *from*?”

Another answer for the ages: “I am a citizen of the world.”

Alexander slowly shook his head from side to side. “Were I not Alexander,” he said, admiringly, “I would be Diogenes.”

“And if I were not Diogenes,” said the near-naked philosopher, “I too would choose to be Diogenes.”

Historians agree that Diogenes was the first person to coin the term ‘citizen of the world.’ It is a big idea that has turned out to be profoundly true. Recent research has confirmed that we humans all have the same genetic makeup. No matter our country, creed, color or culture, we are, first and foremost, all *humans* and, as such, all global citizens entitled to enjoy decent lives as equals on the planet we share. Alas, as we shall soon see, ignorance—often willful—of these facts is the core reason that most prison programs fail.

### **The Rise of Cosmopolitanism**

Happily, in this 22<sup>nd</sup> century the legacy of Diogenes has overtaken most of the free world. His avowal of global citizenship has brought us the philosophy of *Cosmopolitanism*. That rise has been notably-championed by Ghanaian born, Cambridge educated, Princeton professor, Anthony Appiah.

In three words, Cosmopolitanism is *universality plus difference*.

To be a cosmopolitan is to recognize that we are, *first and foremost, all* citizens of the cosmos. *After* that we're we shaped by our culture and our geography.

Sure, it's natural to revere our personal cultural inheritance. But we must respect the beliefs and values of other cultures, too. *Everybody* matters.

But:—

*just as there are lots of values and beliefs that can and must be, local, there are some values that should be universal.*

So toleration requires a concept of the *in-tolerable*.

And that in turn sharply limits the scope of our tolerance.

Conversations across boundaries can be delightful or vexing. But what they mainly are, though, is inevitable.

We enter every conversation – whether with neighbors or with strangers – without a promise of final agreement. So we must feel free to respectfully engage our intelligence and curiosity and open our ears as we seek truth and common ground.

Alas, when it comes to prison reform, this is not easy.

## Why Prison Programs Fail

All over the world, prison rehabilitation is a political hot potato. That's because, in most countries, including New Zealand, retribution trumps rehabilitation:

- Conservative politicians favour outsourcing prisons to private corporations. Alas, these are run for profit, so 'return on investment' is speedily maximized by operating prisons as warehouses for human cargo. The net result is that ex-offenders are delivered back into their communities, angrier than before, but with improved criminal skills.
- Progressives are caught in a similar bind. They cannot afford to be seen as soft on crime, yet they want to be perceived as rehabilitating inmates and reducing criminality. *But*, alas, they fall prey—in both the USA and New Zealand—to fallacies you'll recognize in this parable of the golden eagle:-

*A man found an eagle's egg and put in the nest of a backyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.*

*He thought he was a backyard chicken, so all his life the eagle did what the backyard chickens did.*

*He clucked and cackled and scratched the earth for worms and insects. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.*

*Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.*

*The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who is that?" he asked.*

*"That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth—we're chickens."*

*And so the eagle lived and died a chicken.*

This story resonated with every inmate of every ethnicity. It shows why Diogenes defined himself a 'citizen of the world.' And it perfectly pinpoints the need to shun labels and define one's own identity. It shows that:

- if we're *unaware* of the fallacy of a label, we fall into wrong-headed ideas about why that label should be applied, and to whom;
- if we *accept* a label, it shapes *our* thoughts about how we should behave;
- and, crucially, the label affects the way other people view and treat us.

All of which leads to Corrections Department labels that create and reinforce the syndrome of serial incarceration, beginning with *the label of race*.

- Essentially this says, “too many people ‘of color’ are incarcerated.” And now a further race-based assumption follows: “Folks like this don’t think like other humans, so they need to be isolated from everyone else and given their own special programs.
- Well, sure, prison programs absolutely must address issues of ‘race’ and institutional bias. But we need to keep in mind, that, in point of fact, the prison population—of every hue and ethnicity—is comprised of dispirited strugglers and stragglers from the lowest socio-economic rung. *They’re mostly in prison because of need, not color or so-called race*.
- And, it is, of course, intrinsically racist to suggest that innate human differences determine different cultural outcomes; it is demeaning to suggest recidivism will decline if a particular group is segregated from the rest of the prison population; and it is xenophobic to suggest that the cure for criminal behavior is to teach any particular ethnicity to see themselves as better or worse than any other. That notion leads to racial segregation within prisons, the imagined solution of ‘apartheid’ teaching programs.

This is a particular issue in New Zealand, where, misguided but well-intentioned prison reformers point to the fact that 4000 or so Maori reside in New Zealand prisons, and a further 2500 are shackled in their homes by electronic GPS bracelets. But, on the bright side that total of 6500 represents less than one percent (.7%) of the total Maori population of 875,000.

- To put it another way the other 99.3% of Maori- 868,420 *people- are law-abiding, caring Kiwi citizens of the world*.
- Yes, of course, our citizens of European origin have a lower rate of incarceration. But surely that’s because they hail from a higher socioeconomic status; *they are infinitely less needy*.

And so, let me say it again; forget all about applying racial labels to our citizens. *Instead let’s address the economic plight of all our neediest residents, of every ethnicity, creed, color or culture*.

Somebody said ‘every man treats himself the way society treats the criminal.’ For sure, like that eagle stuck in the chicken coop, how we *identify* ourselves *determines how we treat ourselves and in turn how society treats us*. And, yes, when society applies a criminal label—or a gang-member label—a social stigma follows.

But Rikers taught me that every prisoner acquires a new respect for himself the moment he realizes that first and foremost he is a citizen of the world and cosmos. His *behavior* may have let him down, so he’ll need to adjust that. But his *heart* is still intact; *innately*, he is still a decent human citizen of the world and entitled to treat himself as such—even if the culture around him has social policies stuck in the dark ages.

## HOW WE MIGHT WORK TOGETHER

I'm told that, believing a rise in addiction and gang membership represents a crisis, the New Zealand Police have announced a 'War on Gangs'.

In fact, 'gang-member' is just another label. The idea is that *all* gang members are criminals who traffic in drugs. And, that being so, it's quite okay, desirable in fact, to declare war on them. In fact, most gang members join for protection, not to wallop someone.

Yes of course, some gangs—notably the new 501's—are essentially vicious criminal enterprises serving overseas overlords. And, yes, every violent criminal deserves swift, robust justice followed by serious rehabilitation—as, indeed, to great effect, happened with the many formerly brutal felons who graduated our Eagles max-security New York classes.

But to my mind, these days a Mongrel Mob tattoo is akin to a Rotary badge: a signifier for like-minded citizens banding together to serve the community, because they enjoy the kinship, and get some economic advantages.

Indeed, Rotarians restrict their membership to limited occupational roles so as to be able to share reciprocal business thereby optimizing their personal incomes

The key difference is that gang-members hail from the neediest citizens, for too many of whom mere survival involves banding together to use and market self-soothing substances that happen to be illegal.

Well, yes, of course, the law should be upheld—or overturned. Look closely, and we see that *most drug use is a symptom, not a cause*. Addiction typically springs from a journey of attempted self-soothing embarked upon by those very same lost souls depressed by their inability to escape the lowest socio-economic rung.

Again, we need to remind ourselves that any lasting remedy for such sufferers begins with understanding the psychological and sociological forces that lead to needy self-soothing and mindless serial incarceration—and then, with open eyes, seeing a viable path to creating a whole new trouble-free life.

### The Immediate Opportunity

But let's revisit the New Zealand Police Department and the perception of a 'crisis'. It takes the two Japanese symbols for *danger* and *opportunity* to spell out that word.

So let's agree that right now, although you may be in some danger from the police, you're also looking at a very real opportunity.

As mentioned, the Eagles program, developed over 20 years, is cogent and credible, doable and indelible, and has dramatically reduced recidivism rates. So we think we can also help your prison-prone members to reduce their rate of serial incarceration here in New Zealand, help your members become productive citizens of the world, and help you persevere enhancing your reputation and win respect for your patch—so that, when your members arrive on the scene, both the police the public breathe a sigh of relief, and whisper, "thank goodness for the Mongrel Mob".

I'd invite you to begin by becoming Cosmopolitans. But if you've been listening closely you'll surely know that you already are. So let's start by running a joint Eagles/Mongrel Mob Weekend Retreat. The core of that would be a set of discussion papers focused upon self-understanding, where we as individuals fit into our increasingly complex worlds, and how we might make this nation of ours an even better place. No subject would be off-limits. Open-minded discussion of thorny issues would be embedded by seeing and

discussing relevant movies, and by public speaking and parliamentary debating. I have faith in your communication skills so we'd also like to help field a Mongrel Mob parliamentary debating team, first to contest a team from Waikato University, then to enter the New Zealand national debating arena.

As a next step, It should not be unduly daunting to help you generate a practical entrepreneurial program to help you create manage a reliable legitimate income stream.

In fact your leadership is strong, your followers are keen, and the gang structure is akin to that of a lean corporate team. By, say, renting a truck, your members could enter any number of legitimate businesses.

Bear in mind, too, that in the USA Eagles graduates like Kenny and Joe were appointed to well-paid full-time teaching roles for at-risk youth and prison inmates—hence our mantra, 'it takes an ex-offender to render an offender an ex.'

Unfortunately, here in New Zealand, upon release former prisoners who've 'seen the light' are not allowed to return prison to share what they've learned. So, effectively, the sad and crazy fact is that incarcerated inmate counselors are mostly dedicated criminals who specialize in teaching crooked behavior. But, that will surely change. And if when it does, the opportunity to become a certified Eagles instructor and teach Eagles prison programs would open up for each and every one of you.

### **A Final Thought and a Modest Proposal**

Right now, upon release from prison, anxious, angry, unchanged former inmates are effectively pushed off a cliff to a waiting ambulance attended by parole officers.

This is madness. So based upon the 20 years of experience in United States prisons that resulted in a single digit recidivism rate here's a modest proposal:-

- 1. Make our prisons government-owned enterprises and discard the warehousing model.** Storing and punishing human animals is at best a short term route to immediate profit. In the long term, it merely produces more criminals.
- 2. Treat prisons as income streams not cost centers.** Recognize that the full cost to society of incarceration includes a massive but invisible item; *lost tax revenue*.
- 3. Change the mission to the creation of productive, tax-paying citizens.** This suggestion is anathema to old-guard law-and-order zealots, who prefer punishment to rehabilitation. But let's face facts: most inmates will be released back into society, so this is the outcome we'd all like—right?
- 4. Acknowledge and address the social roots of criminal behavior.** Criminality mostly springs from social or family breakdowns that lead to lack of education, unresolved traumas and ill-treated mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, and self-esteem issues—so we need to be treating those issues by making prisons authentic rehabilitation centers.
- 5. Change the prison environment.** Vengeful conditions are counterproductive. The most effective form of correction is to treat people as adult human beings. So create facilities that reproduce the atmosphere of colleges and convalescent homes. Pay inmates for routine prison labor, but charge them for gym and sports facilities, and television, sound systems, mini-refrigerators, and let them dress to their own style.
- 6. Change the job-specification for corrections officers.** Train them to be coaches and rehabilitators not just armed, intimidating security guards. Rid them of batons,

handcuffs, Tasers or pepper-spray. And let them share the same dining facility as the inmates.

**7. Impart liberating life-changing ideas.** Knowledge is the primary key to authentic long-term change (and the crucial first step of the Eagles Foundation Taking Wings program). Implant the big concepts that underlie the mostly invisible social and individual forces that create ‘the syndrome of serial incarceration.’ This is *not* a university degree program. This kind of knowledge is accessible and memorable and imparting it takes weeks or months not years.

**8. Imbue returning inmates with skills they can market.** The demand for unskilled labour is effectively exhausted. Ideally, in the new economy re-entrants need to be capable of creating an income stream, not just hoping to find a job. To do this, they need to re-enter with a marketable skill and entrepreneurial know-how.

**9. Treat offenders and ex-offenders as assets not liabilities.** The untapped talent of prison inmates is astonishing. They are an effectively free source of teaching personnel. The best prison teachers are hard-nosed ex-offenders who have been liberated intellectually and emotionally. So embrace the Eagles mantra, *It takes an ex-offender to render an offender an ex.*

**10. Increase the return on investment by changing the prison reward system.** Benchmark success in terms of taxes paid by returning ex-offenders, and award bonuses to all prison personnel, including inmate teaching staff, in terms of their success in creating tax-paying citizens.

**All of the above can be achieved at minimal cost.** It would just take a new way of seeing things. We already own the prisons, and they are crammed to the bars with raw talent and potential teachers with a deep yearning to change the world. I know that because I recruited so many of them to join me as unpaid volunteers working with ex-offenders. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming, and they’re still out there changing lives. For the doubters out there, I should add, that these suggestions have already been incorporated, with great success, in places like Scandinavia and Portugal. So why not in every other country that claims to be enlightened?

**But, we can’t do everything at once.** So I invite you to help us do something at once. Come join us, and advocate a pilot Eagles program for 30 or so of lost Kiwi souls currently languishing in prison cells.

