

Prisons ten years on

John Podmore reviews developments in prisons, both positive and negative, under New Labour.

Prisons contain three important organisational facets. They are multi-million pound businesses responsible for large amounts of public expenditure and are often key parts of local economies.

As such they are employers, both directly and indirectly, of large numbers of people, the majority in uniform but an increasing number in diverse specialisms through a range of contractual agreements.

The third and most important component is prisoners. Prisons are required to take difficult and damaged people (many of whom have led chaotic and disordered lives), treat them with humanity and dignity and release them back into their communities better able to play a constructive part and less likely to reoffend.

How, over the last 10 years, have those components changed?

Prisons have undoubtedly developed as more efficient businesses. They have operated on increasingly tight budgets as regimes have improved and the level of interventions increased. Their performance is under ever-increasing scrutiny with standards and security audits, finance audits, health and safety audits as well as inspection by the Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP). In a three year period at Brixton Prison I encountered 15 such events. Such processes struggle to get the balance right between outcomes and outputs. Internally the focus has been on outputs whilst HMCIP with its 'healthy prison model' has given priority to outcomes. Excellent, groundbreaking work by Alison Liebling and her team from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge brought in, at the request of the service, the MQPL (measurement of the quality of prisoner life). This was a highly structured and scientific attempt to develop and evaluate a decency agenda and come some way to bridging the outcome-output divide. It remains an important and underused tool to measure the moral performance of prisons.

The unprecedented growth of the prison population over the last ten years has resulted in the massive recruitment of a range of staff from directly employed prison officers to contracted drug workers. This has resulted in both positives and negatives. Age profiles of staff in many jails have reduced significantly, challenging some negative cultures, but with that comes inexperienced staff working with an often more sophisticated client group.

The change in the diversity of staff recruited has

been extremely positive if not uniform across the country. Many London prisons can quote staffing percentages from black and minority ethnic groups over 30%. This has little parallel anywhere else in the civil service. Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender groups are encouraged and increasingly less stigmatised. But representation of any minority group at the most senior level remains a problem, as do issues of staff retention. Pressures on training needs are intense as the 'industry' grows. The employment of ex-offenders remains an issue that the service still struggles with. There are many excellent drug and alcohol workers with criminal records without whom interventions would suffer, but there remains a pool of labour yet to be tapped without compromising security. If we are to impact on reoffending rates then the level of expertise of those working with offenders is of prime importance. Norwegian prison officers train for two years and complete a graduate qualification. By comparison, the current training period in England and Wales is eight weeks and without any nationally recognised qualification.

But what of the changes in that most important component – prisoners? Security has always been high on everyone's agenda, not least politicians and the public. And its importance is undeniable if prisons are to retain the confidence of the public and fulfil their duty to protect that public. To that end the Prison Service has been successful due in large part to a professional approach to security underpinned with extensive (and routinely audited) processes and procedures. It is a great pity that the recent furore around open prisons has distracted attention from that success, and indeed a more important debate about reducing reoffending, which remains at over 60% for the general prison population and over 80% for younger offenders. Absconds from open prisons are reducing and the risk posed by those that do is rarely high, particularly when most are close to release anyway. The issue raises more questions about the chaos and disorder in prisoner's lives than it does about security.

The balance between security and regime remains an important question and one that should be explicit in the debate. Many would argue that this debate currently centres around the most dangerous of offenders, rather than the much greater number – those who commit high volume minor crime within their own, often deprived, communities and become 'revolving door' repeat offenders.

What we must acknowledge, however, is an unprecedented rise in the number of programmes and interventions for prisoners, many of which are now provided in a more logical and effective manner. Local Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) are now responsible for the delivery of healthcare. Specialist drug organisations provide assessments and programmes. Local education colleges deliver a prison curriculum. Work is tendered, contracts let and managed. The purchaser-provider model is here to stay. Figures show huge increases in qualifications gained, programmes delivered, detoxes completed, medical screening carried out and psychiatric referrals made. Above all, partnership working, though still 'work in progress', would have been unknown to many prison establishments ten years ago.

Prisoners' needs

But why are reoffending rates still so high? What is missing? I would suggest two things: an understanding of the wider complex needs of prisoners; and the joining together of prisons and communities to meet those needs in an improved, holistic and structured way. The Social Exclusion Unit's report on reducing reoffending (SEU, 2002) remains a seminal document describing that complexity, but has its message truly been embraced by the programme of interventions? Improving the health and well-being of prisoners, tackling some substance misuse, and providing basic skills is work well underway, but at risk of falling foul of overcrowding and increasing turnover as pressure grows to manage the current crisis. Helping with housing and employment has some way to go, not least because both are issues that the community outside and employers are reluctant to acknowledge. But there are key gaps we must recognise. Drug work concentrates on opiates such as heroin whilst the trend is towards increasingly complex use of stimulants, especially crack and cocaine. Alcohol remains the forgotten drug in terms of treatment, despite being the root cause of many offences and integral to domestic violence. The need to tackle family and personal relationships remains marginal to the intervention culture. Many prisoners in my experience come from backgrounds with multiple broken partnerships and resultant single parent families – a powerful brew for a new generation of socially excluded offenders. Take a broken bottle and drop it on a concrete floor. It is said that in the criminal justice system we are continually trying to put those shattered pieces back together. How much better not to drop those precious bottles in the first place.

And let us not forget Restorative Justice. It is not for everyone and it must be delivered with caution and professionalism. Nor is it just about victim, mediator, and perpetrator. At Brixton we were blessed via charitable funding with one of the most innovative and challenging programmes

I've ever encountered. Inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, further work in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia, the Forgiveness Project sought to get prisoners to 'humanise' their offending, to understand how their actions damage not only the victims and their families but also their own families and communities and ultimately themselves.

Yet the greater range of interventions will be ineffective if they remain as 'treatment silos'. Offenders faced with multiple assessments from specialists who rarely stay in post more than 12 months will remain disillusioned and excluded. We have the phrase 'end to end offender management' underpinned by the model of joined-up working, with communities truly taking responsibility. We have yet to deliver it. This foreboding description of new developments was written back in 1998: "the new penology is managerial, not aspirational or transformative...its discourse is characterised by an emphasis on systemic integrity and on internal evaluation based on formal rationality rather than on external social objectives such as the elimination of crime or reintegration into the community. Consequently it is less concerned to diagnose and treat individuals as to identify, classify and manage unruly groups sorted by dangerousness" (Brownlee 1998).

We should reflect on how accurately this describes our criminal justice system today, and if this is the sort of system we want for the future.

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References

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