

MASSAGING THE MEDIA

Profiling the penal reform lobby

Ever since the first broadsheet newspapers appeared some 200 years ago, crime stories have always featured heavily. Crime *is* news; indeed, reading some papers or watching local news programmes on television, it can sometimes seem as if crime is the *only* news.

So how do those of us charged with promoting penal reform go about using the media? In this article, I shall explore the relationship between lobbyists and the journalists covering home affairs. Let us hope I do not give away too many tricks of the trade!

Targets

All campaigners, whatever the cause, have two main targets in mind. The politicians and officials who actually make policy, and the public whose opinions and attitudes set the boundaries within which policy is developed.

Nevertheless, it is a fact of life that newspaper stories and comments in the serious press carry more weight with the policymakers than do stories in the much more widely-read popular press. I appreciate that the more egalitarian readers of CJM may find this rather elitist, and it does not mean of course that a campaign in the Daily Mail or the Daily Mirror cannot affect change in public policy. The recent obsession with juvenile offending in all the papers has clearly emboldened the Home Secretary to bring forward plans for new custodial institutions for children as young as 12. But to most lobbyists - whether for penal reform or any other object - what matters most is the coverage we receive in The Times, Guardian, and Independent.

The Independent has been particularly strong on penal policy issues since its launch, although its editorial line - like that of The Times - has been in favour of privatisation of the prison system. Best of all is coverage on Radio 4's Today programme, a programme listened to by just about every significant policymaker in the land.

I must also admit that when it comes to newspaper coverage, the penal reform lobby rarely gets a look in with the popular press. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of occasions when the Prison Reform Trust has featured in the popular press over the last year. However, we have enjoyed a much wider audience through the medium of local and national television and radio, and through the regional press.

Techniques

What has been the basis of the penal reform groups' relationship with the press? I would emphasise three qualities: the authority of our research and information; the regularity with which we pepper the papers with stories and press releases; and, finally, the speed with which we respond to initiatives and statements emerging from the Home Office.

In all of this we have been assisted by the notorious disregard in which the Home Office has been held over the years by the press. It is drummed into every cub reporter that the word of no institution, certainly no department of state, is to be treated with more caution than that of the Home Office. That no department is more duplicitous, more secretive, more downright up-to-no-good. Whether this reputation is now - or was ever - justified is neither here nor there. It is an article of journalistic faith that nothing the Home Office says is to be trusted.

Thus it is that the media regularly turn to the prison reform lobby for confirmation or interpretation of Home Office announcements. Indeed, as a source of information - including on Government statistics - we seem to be the preferred source over the Home Office Press Office. Contact of this kind tends to expand into a wider reciprocal relationship, with benefits to the lobby and, one hopes, to the public at large.

It is, I think, significant that with one or two exceptions the penal reform lobby avoids sensationalism in its treatment of issues. Although all reporters prefer a colourful quote to enliven their prose, dealing with politicians daily they also have an acute sense for exaggeration and kite-flying. Reporters covering home affairs on a regular basis have a pretty good idea of what is going on. It is perhaps for this reason that Home Office Ministers with a story of doubtful provenance tend to focus on the Parliamentary correspondents, who have neither the time nor the contacts to check the information they are given.

The other 'technique' which is worth mentioning is the use of letters to the editor. I should be surprised if there is any other lobby which has so regularly appeared in the correspondence columns of the newspapers as the penal reform movement in recent years. Counting up the number of letters from Prison Reform



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Trust, the Howard League and NACRO, I imagine that between us we average well over two a month.

Any account of the movement's contact with the press should also mention the sterling efforts of the National Association of Probation Officers. NAPO's Assistant General Secretary, Harry Fletcher, is in my estimation the most effective user of the media since Des Wilson was at the height of his powers. The great media sense of HM Inspector of Prisons, Stephen Tumim, has also added greatly to press interest and public knowledge of penal affairs.

Success

In my judgement, NAPO and the three mainstream prison pressure groups have had more success in our relationships with the media than any other lobby in recent years. However, we all know that press interest can wane when a story no longer is of prime political significance. Who would envy the press officer of CND these days, especially looking back to the heady time of the early 1980s?

Sadly, there are already signs that news editors are tiring of prison stories. Presumably for marketing reasons, The Times and Daily Telegraph have increased the number of mainstream crime stories they run at the expense of penal policy matters. Standard-issue press releases (especially those issued for Monday mornings, Sunday being a slow news day), seem to get less coverage than in the past. More and more, even the serious papers seem to value 'exclusives' over reports carried by all their rivals.

We at Prison Reform Trust are looking at ways to respond to this change in 'market conditions'. Media coverage is only one of the tools which we use to inform the public and promote reform in the prison system. But few could doubt that without a high public profile, the penal reform lobby would soon find itself less influential with officials, politicians and practitioners.

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