

# BACK INSIDE AGAIN

## Wandsworth Prison early 80s Pentonville Prison early 90s

Sounds like the refrain from a blues number?

I am currently working for the Inner London Probation Service with the Prison Service at HMP Pentonville.

In between working at Wandsworth and Pentonville I worked in South and Central London for both the South East and Inner London Probation Services, before leaving probation to help Victim Support at a national level. While with Victim Support I helped develop services and awareness relating to the needs of the families of murder victims, through a Home Office sponsored action research project, as well as services for victims and witnesses having to attend Crown Court. I was subsequently laid low through a serious pedestrian mishap in Holland, while presenting at an international conference on Traumatic Stress. If further dramatic ironies were needed I was also investigating potential Victim Support responses and services, relating to the needs of families of victims of fatal road crashes. I am currently struggling hard to restrain myself from responding emotionally when offenders say "I'm only here for motoring offences, Guv".



Peter Dalrymple

### Changing attitudes

So how have my attitudes, responses and observations changed as a result of my experiences both inside and outside prison? At this point you might expect another blues refrain. Not so.

My primary observation concerns the attitudes of offenders. For many, their attitude appears to stem from and through embittered self-justification of their offending behaviour. Never mind the victim(s) of crimes, offenders continue to look upon themselves as victims of misfortune, the police, courts, probation, prison and parole systems. They are often 'back inside again'. However the probation and prison services are beginning to work together to confront, as opposed to just containing, the behavioural status-quo. After all, we believe in confronting, or talking through with, not just punishing children if they are to learn appropriate behaviours. Punishing through deprivation of liberty would seem unlikely to achieve modified behaviour on its own. Probation Officers are charged with the responsibility of preventing re-offending and the successful re-integration of the offender in the community. The Prison Service is required to look after offenders humanely and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release. How can they do that using 150 year old buildings and experiencing expenditure cuts? For my part, whatever the extent of operational adversity, I can try to make sure I help prevent more people becoming victims of crime.

### Changing populations

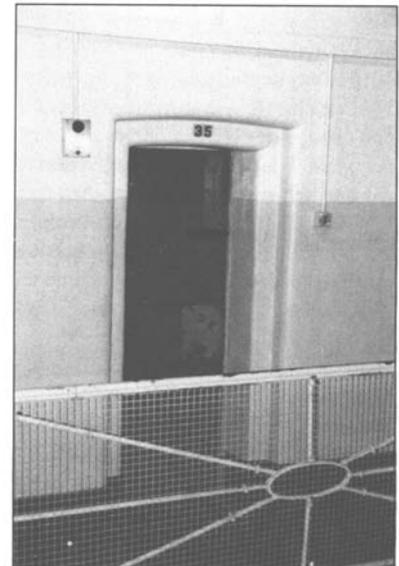
10 years on, I also notice a dramatic change in the ethnic mix of the prison population. At a rough guess, some 40% of inmates are black. At the same time there are now black prison officers and probation officers. Not in proportion to the ethnic mix of inmates, but growing, as is an awareness and understanding of the principles of equal opportunities and race issues. These changes are challenging the beliefs of all for the better.

### Changing drugs

Thirdly, and perhaps as worrying is the availability of drugs, perhaps mirroring the community, not just in Pentonville, but, I am reliably informed, all prisons.

Home brewed hooch in Wandsworth in the 80s, unless confiscated, was a means of avoiding confronting self and boredom as an inmate. Now crack, cocaine, heroin and amphetamines are doing the same job as well as having serious implications, for control, security and behaviour, let alone rehabilitative effort. Should all visitors be searched? What a resource and moral dilemma. Also a dilemma in terms of inmate culture, offending behaviour and regime planning.

A final observation concerns stricter budgetary control. Does this imply cost cutting or careful management or both?



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### What progress?

Many of the changes I have observed might appear to be negative. They need not be and are not necessarily so. Prisons are changing for the better. Greater tolerance, understanding and freedom to change and develop regimes are all apparent. It is sometimes difficult to recognise success within such a contained environment. The Probation Service is also changing and evolving according to the demands of criminal justice and other needs. It should not and does not stop both services working together towards agreed goals and ideals even if achievement is sometimes frustratingly slow.

*Peter Dalrymple is a maingrade Probation Officer in Pentonville Prison*