

CHANGING PROBATION

The All Singing, All Dancing Probation Officer

A couple of years ago, during a discussion about the relative merits of generic and specialist working, our employers told our union representatives that the days of the all singing, all dancing Probation Officer were gone. I am not alone in regretting the demise of this happy creature.

I qualified as a Probation Officer in 1979, a few months after the election of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister. Although the demography of the Probation Service had changed significantly in the previous ten years, it was still dominated by white middle aged men, but they were becoming increasingly at odds with a younger, predominantly female, university educated intake. Brought up on a heady



Paul Kidd Hewitt

diet of sex and drugs and rock and roll, we poured into the Probation Service during its rapid expansion in the mid-1970s. And yet, after a period of culture shock on both sides, the whole thing settled down fairly quickly. We came to realise that our forebears were not all raving fascists. They came to accept that although we may have come across as degenerate Trotskyite vegetarians, we worked hard and appeared to have our clients' best interests at heart.

The patch principle

At that time, we were organised into geographic patches, and within that locality, the Probation Office dealt with virtually everything that came its way. The office waiting room would fill up with vagrant alcoholics, prostitutes, parents bringing in their errant children for a few stern words of wisdom, warring couples in search of marriage guidance and every type of offender from the first time shoplifter to the armed robber on

parole. Our job was to provide a social work service to people appearing before the Court and this broad definition of our task meant that we had little excuse for refusing anyone who came our way. The combination of an often highly eccentric, heterogeneous staff group and the enormous variety of our clientele made for a job which was endlessly fascinating and very rich and rewarding.

On my appointment as a Probation Officer, I was given my own room, a plastic briefcase, a street map of London, twenty-five files and a warrant card to get me into prisons. And then left more or less alone to carry out my job as I saw fit.

We had Senior Probation Officers in each office. They carried caseloads of their own, wrote court reports, visited prisons and did court duty with the rest of us. There was a strong sense of their being first and foremost practitioners. They clearly had some degree of management role, but as we were individually responsible and answerable to the courts for the conduct of our work, this gave us a considerable degree of autonomy in the way we carried out our duties. On my appointment as a Probation Officer, I was given my own room, a plastic briefcase, a street map of London, twenty-five files and a warrant card to get me into prisons. And then left more or less alone to carry out my job as I saw fit.

Probation today

The experience of working as a Probation Officer today is a very different one. The geographical basis of our work has been weakened, if not severed completely and many offices no longer serve an identifiable community. Instead the job we do has been rationalised and broken up into its component parts. Our client group has been defined and redefined as the broad spectrum of people we formerly accommodated has been whittled away. First to vanish from our waiting rooms were the couples seeking matrimonial advice. Then the prostitutes, to be quickly

followed by the vagrant alcoholics. Anyone not on probation or parole began to be actively discouraged. Nowadays the process has accelerated to the point that we no longer offer any real degree of service to those serving less than a twelve month prison sentence. People in dire need with acute financial or emotional difficulties will no longer be placed on probation unless the offences they have committed are deemed sufficiently serious to justify our intervention. We can no longer, by any stretch of the imagination, be seen to be providing a social work service to those appearing before the courts. This is not our job.

In fact, it is often difficult to see the work of the Probation Officer as 'our' job. During my first ten years as a Probation Officer in a 'field' probation office, I wrote court reports, supervised Probation Orders, visited clients in prison and saw them afterwards on release and did court duty at the local magistrates court.

Efficiency for whom?

In the last five years, the Service has changed to the point where such a generic experience is a rarity, with each of these tasks split off and performed by a different group of Probation Officers. This was achieved in the name of greater efficiency, increased throughput and the hope that greater expertise would be developed by discrete concentration upon one task. To some degree all these aims have been realised, but to the detriment and bewilderment of our client group as they are passed from office to office while they progress through the various stages of the criminal justice process. This new way of working has been devised by Senior Probation Officers who no longer carry out any face to face work with clients of the Service, leaving them free to fulfil their management role. Alongside our bewildered clients, we also have the court expressing dissatisfaction that they no longer know 'their' Probation Officers. It is difficult to see exactly who benefits from this new arrangement. We are definitely not singing and dancing any more.

Kevin Kirwin is a maingrade probation officer working for the Inner London Probation Service.