

Striking the balance

Joyce Quin MP, Home Office Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation talks to David Kidd-Hewitt about the Government's plans for reform of the criminal justice process



Home Office

What do you consider to be the most problematic aspect of the prison system in the UK today?

Well the big difficulty in dealing with prisons issues is simply the combination of a rapidly rising prison population and tight resources. Particularly the population, because the figures have turned out to be much more dramatic even than the forecasts were when we came into office and this has therefore necessitated extra money for new buildings and regimes to accompany those new buildings. Yet at the same time there is still overcrowding in the existing estate which is particularly affecting the local prisons. Certain parts of the system are under a great deal of strain.

How far does remand contribute to this overcrowding issue?

20% of the prison population is accounted for by remand. Obviously, if we could speed up the system that would make a contribution to reducing those numbers and we are keen to do that. That issue can also be looked at in other ways for example, by improving bail information schemes which might help increase the number of bailees rather than people remanded to custody. Also, although this is not part of an immediate programme, we could look at such things as electronic monitoring as a kind of extra safeguard in terms of bailees. But the most important by far is to reduce the delays in the system.

Have you got a plan to do that? How are you going to speed up the remand system?

Really by having tight limits and then organising the criminal justice system in such a way that it can meet those limits. The limits are much tighter in Scotland and I think this is one area where we can learn from the Scottish experience.

It's interesting that you're looking to Scotland rather than the USA which tends to happen too often when prison issues are discussed.

Well, I am a keen internationalist and I believe in getting useful experience from wherever you can. I recently visited Sweden and found many interesting aspects of their system, including their use of electronic monitoring and their very localised prisons. Of course it is much easier to do if you've got a small prison population and a country of a manageable size like Sweden. France is another interesting example because there they tend to make much greater use of non-custodial sentences and punishments than we do.

Keeping to the issue of prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham recently referred to several Young Offender Institutions as being 'warehouses'. Are our prisons best described as warehouses?

No, they're not best described as warehouses but none the less there is a certain amount of 'warehousing' going on given the large numbers that we're dealing

with. But prisons do offer a range of programmes and activities for prisoners. The difficulty with overcrowding is that not as high a proportion of prisoners get access to those activities as we would like. But all prisons, none the less do have targets for delivery of regimes and I know from going around prisons that staff are very committed to that aspect of their work.

You've indicated that prison staff do work hard against the odds and it is a difficult job but is the idea of rehabilitation really a dead concept in the 1990's UK prison system? Can prisons rehabilitate people?

Rehabilitation is not a dead word. Indeed, many of the programmes that have been introduced into the prison system in recent years are very much aimed at getting people to change their behaviour and therefore on release play a constructive role in society. There are some good offending behaviour programmes, some good anger management programmes, some good sex offender treatment programmes, some good programmes getting people to understand the effects of particular crimes which they may have committed on various occasions. Sir David Ramsbotham talks about inconsistencies in the system. We are concerned about the patchiness of provision, partly because of the numbers problem which I've already mentioned and therefore we have agreed to the appointment of a Director of Regimes at national level specifically to focus on the delivery of regimes in prisons. We need to build on what works and to address the needs of particular groups in the prison system - young offenders, women, adults, males, lifers and so on.

What about the direction in which provision for women prisoners is going?

I think that we are very much aware that women do have special circumstances. Very often they do have children and therefore the need to keep family links going is particularly important in their case. The present system works against that in as far as because women are so sensible they commit fewer

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crimes than men and there are fewer women prisoners as a result. They tend quite often to be a long way away from home because there are not very many establishments. So the need to find ways of improving family links is very important. There is some very good provision in mother and baby units in Holloway and also in Styal and I would certainly like to pay tribute to the work that they do. But we are taking forward the recommendations that the Chief Inspector made in his report on women in prison and examining those recommendations to see how many of them can be put into effect in the short term and how we can move towards some of the recommendations in the medium term.

You claim that if you tackle the youth issue you are in fact tackling the prison system and criminal justice system as a whole.

Indeed, and you are also tackling the crime issue generally. If you can get into the system early, start to address the problems of those young people and their offending behaviour at an early stage, I believe you will then save a lot of resources but also a lot of effort later on in the system. If you can prevent people from graduating into adult criminals, if you can act early so they don’t end up in young offender institutions, that can make an enormous contribution to reducing crime in our society.

You commented at the recent ISTD Conference, that the policy recommended by Sir David Ramsbotham of removing those aged under 18 from the prison system is easier said than done, so what is going to be the time scale on this?

Well, we haven’t committed ourselves to that policy. We are reviewing the whole of the juvenile secure estate and looking at the range of accommodation to see how best to make progress for the future. Obviously secure accommodation will be needed because sadly some young people,

some juveniles, commit very serious crimes but at the same time we have got to ensure that that secure accommodation is appropriate, that it is more likely to lead to reduced offending in the future than increased offending. We are reviewing the whole of the estate, but I should stress that although we certainly see a separate system, that system may still have very strong links with the Prison Service. In many cases the work of prison staff has been commended by the Chief Inspector. They have been producing good programmes with these young people and I do not want to lose that skill and that knowledge from the system. So how the overall system will look at the end of the day is not yet clear and won’t be clear until the review is completed and we can draw up priorities for the medium and long term.

But within this period of Government you would hope to make quite an impact presumably?

Certainly, because youth justice and reform of the youth justice system is one of the Government’s priorities. The Crime and Disorder Bill contains many proposals relating to young people, both offenders serving community and custodial sentences and indeed, measures to try and get at the pre-offending stage by establishing Youth Offender Teams in all parts of the country. We want to bring the different parts of the criminal justice system and the wider communities, local authorities, voluntary organisations, business interests and so on, into a co-ordinated approach to promote crime prevention and seek to create safer societies.

Is there a privatisation issue here? Will there be any attempts to encourage any private enterprise initiatives in dealing with young people, for example?

Well, basically what we are talking about is the function and responsibility of the State.

Nonetheless, we want to encourage all parts of the community to get involved in tackling crime and there are various ways in which we can do that. In terms of prisons there has been some private sector involvement, in prison industries for example. It’s an area where commercial knowledge and expertise can be helpful in giving offenders some idea of what the business world is about and encouraging them to acquire skills which may enable them to work in that sector subsequently. But nonetheless, what we are basically talking about is the State finding a system at local and regional as well as national level which will harness the energies of all parts of the community in the important business of tackling crime and preventing crime.

Minister, can you expand on your concerns to achieve a better balance between custodial and non-custodial sentencing? What do you see as a better balance?

There has certainly been in recent years, no doubt fuelled by the previous Home Secretary’s statement that ‘prison works’, somehow a belief that only a prison sentence can provide an effective punishment. I simply don’t believe that’s true. The evidence of my own eyes shows that there are good regimes in prison as there are very good and effective community sentencing projects.

There is a demonstration project which I visited recently in Shropshire and indeed another one on Teeside which is aiming at promoting confidence on the part of the judiciary and indeed on the part of the general public in community sentencing. These demonstration projects have been successful in showing people, particularly sentencers, just how good some of the community programmes are and that they are tough punishments, they are not some kind of soft option. They do challenge people, force them to face up to what they’ve done and point them to various ways in which they can play a more constructive role in future. The experience of France and Sweden, as I was mentioning before, also show the value of community sentencing.

I think we do need to tackle the

public perception that this is somehow a soft option when it can be extremely effective. Furthermore, the electronic monitoring trials show that in certain cases you can combine electronic monitoring with community sentencing and that can also provide a tough and challenging regime which indeed some people have said is tougher than prison. So there is a very big role and big potential for community sentencing and that’s what I mean when I say I want to see a better balance.

But as you say, persuading the public is difficult. I am not quite sure how you do that?

It is difficult but at the same time I believe that Ministers have a responsibility to highlight what works in community sentencing and bring that to people’s attention as effectively as we can. In some ways it seems to me that is already happening at local and regional level but perhaps the national debate hasn’t taken off yet in quite the way that we would like. But I am sure that particularly given such things as the Home Secretary’s speech to the National Probation Convention last November, that will be an important step in highlighting this very useful community sentencing work.

Looking to the future - will we continue to see prison building programmes increase, or do you see your policies leading to a need for less prison building than we are engaged upon at present?

I would be very unwise to make any predictions of that kind. Obviously there is a prison building programme that is underway. That is necessary to house the increasing numbers but I would say that a lot of it is necessary anyway because ultimately you want to be able to be in a position to refurbish and modernise some of the older prisons and would need to use the new accommodation while that process was taking shape.

Thank you Minister.