

The Prison Service and the Prison Officers' Association

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THOSE prison officers who are now on the point of retirement after a lifetime in the Service have seen a transformation in their conditions of service. The role of the prison officer in the administration of the prisons, of his status in society, his pay standards, and the accommodation which he and his family are expected to occupy have all changed greatly. I can speak of this with personal knowledge because it was in 1927 that I joined the Service at Bristol Prison.

Only ten years before I joined the Service, officers were still working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. whilst the night staff reported for duty at 6 p.m. and worked through the night until 6 a.m. the following morning. For this kind of attendance the pay of the basic officer ranged from 29s. 0d. to 45s. 0d. weekly. The annual holiday was 13 days but no compensation was given for Public or Bank Holidays. Uniform was out-dated and officers were required to wear cutlasses whilst on duty. It was not until after the strike by police and prison staffs that these things were altered. The Governor class of that day were almost exclusively recruited from the commissioned ranks of the Army and Navy and

they imported into the prisons the atmosphere of the barrack square and the quarter deck. Discipline was stern and rigid and the staff were expected to carry out their dealings with the prisoners in the same manner. Officers were reported for the most trivial offences and were subjected to a system of monetary fines which often caused real hardship to the men and their families. These conditions were only tolerated because other work was difficult to obtain.

The greatest change, perhaps, during the years that have followed has been in the part which the prison officer is expected to play in the administration of the prisons and the relationship that he is expected to have with the prisoner. In the old days to talk to a prisoner, except to give him a necessary order or to check him for some breach of discipline, was to run the risk of a charge of undue familiarity.

In the days when I entered the Service the first signs of a changing atmosphere were becoming apparent, particularly in connection with the purposes which prisons were intended officially to fulfil. According to Sir Lionel Fox, in his book "The English Prison and Borstal System", it was in 1921 that "gusts

of fresh air began to blow through the pages" of the Reports of the Prison Commissioners.

Since then, of course, there has been a good deal of such fresh air. Emphasis is now much more on training and rehabilitation—as indicated, for example, in the new Prison Rules introduced in 1949. Prisoners have been more carefully and diversely classified; the number of types of prisons has been extended. Detention Centres have been set up and the Criminal Justice Act of 1948 has introduced the conception that the purposes of a prison sentence may be avowedly different indeed in different cases. Great advances have been made in the study of the medical and psychological aspects of crime and the East-End Institution for the treatment of convicted aggressive psychopaths will be opened in the comparatively near future.

All this, no doubt, will continue. More attention will be given to discussing and, let us hope, discovering the causes of crime. Certainly, with the present inflated size of the prison population, there is great urgency about this work, and no lack of material of which study may be made: a sobering thought which may create some doubt as to whether the problem is being tackled along the right lines.

In these changes, however, the individual prison officer has not always had the guidance, support or leadership to which he feels himself entitled. He will carry out the new functions expected of him more effectively if he is kept, by refresher courses and by the encouragement of study, in full touch with developments in thought about prison work. Prison officers

have a unique experience of criminals and of the practical problems involved in maintaining them in custody. That experience ought to be fully used in any study of crime.

Indeed, if any further developments in prison policy are to be successful, the understanding and support of the prison staff must be enlisted. For the most part the Prison Service is staffed with men and women of more than average humanity; people with an abiding interest in their fellow men. No officer can serve in a prison for very long without learning, by personal experiences, that there are many types of criminal—from the individual who is genuinely the victim of some misfortune of circumstances or upbringing, to the person at the other end of the scale who has had every advantage of ability and opportunity but has deliberately chosen to take a calculated risk to win a good living by illegal means.

The British public being what it is (and we would not wish to change it) will always tend to sympathise with the underdog—at any rate so long as he is in custody—and tend to be ready to believe the worst of those who have to exercise authority. This is doubtless better than that public opinion should support uncritically or with indifference all that authority does but, at the same time, it can and does create great difficulties for prison officers (as it does for their colleagues in the police) and sometimes creates an atmosphere which can quite easily undermine their morale. Every inmate who enters prison is a human being entitled to all that can be done while in custody so as to be enabled to lead a useful life on release; nevertheless it is quite impossible for one to ignore the fact that the prison population

contains inmates who are violent and aggressive, people who are vindictive, sly and spiteful, and those who delight in making mischief between prisoner and prisoner or between prisoner and officer.

The prison officer, even the youngest and least experienced—or, perhaps I should say, particularly the youngest and the least experienced—cannot ignore these facts; they make up his daily life. He must maintain his authority or everything is lost; and he must maintain it now by his character and leadership rather than by the exclusive reliance on the sharp discipline of past days. The change in atmosphere and attitude is welcome, for it makes the task of the officer a more constructive and interesting one, but at the same time, of course, it makes it a more difficult one.

In discharging it the support of the higher authorities is essential. We recognise that the Prison Commissioners cannot and should not attempt to take up every case in which an author who has been in prison alleges some harshness against prison officers (or who merely concentrates on prison staff a generalised hatred of authority), but certainly the more glaring and vindictive of such attacks should be answered. More important, however, the Prison Commissioners and the Home Office should do all that they can to make known the positive and constructive role that prison officers play.

Of even greater practical importance is an understanding by Governors and Commissioners that the new relationship between prisoners and staff—which has received a big boost from what has been

described as the "Norwich Scheme"—can exist only in a framework of firm but understanding discipline. The prison officer and the prisoner must know that abuses of the freer and more human atmosphere will not be tolerated. Indeed, in my view, the "Norwich Scheme" was helped to success very substantially by the fact that in the Governor of Norwich Prison—a former Chairman of the Prison Officers' Association, we are proud to say—we have a man who understands prison administration thoroughly largely because of his lengthy experience as a basic grade prison officer.

There have been, since the war, a number of occasions on which Home Secretaries have paid tribute to the essential role of the individual prison officer and the social service nature of prison employment. "The prison administration", runs one of the resolutions agreed at the first United Nations Congress on the prevention of crime and treatment of offenders, held in 1955, "shall constantly seek to awaken and maintain in the minds both of the personnel and of the public the conviction that this work is a social service of great importance . . .". In the Prison Officers' Association, however, we have had to comment rather sharply that, while these statements have been made, the standards of pay, educational requirement, career prospects, etc., which they imply have not been readily extended to prison staffs.

In this respect the Wynn-Parry Report represents a great step forward. While it did not, by any means, recommend everything which the Association members would have liked to see, it proposed—and the Government have implemented—pay levels which

were substantially above those previously ruling. It drew attention to the need to improve the standards of messing, quarters and welfare, and has set us on the path of an arrangement of working hours and of reasonable recompense for overtime which provides some recognition of the fact that the seven-day-a-week nature of prison work merits some mitigation.

Of equal importance, however, is the comment and guidance which the Committee gave in respect of the future. I have two points particularly in mind. The first is the broad hint given by the Committee that although it did not feel able to recommend immediately the sort of qualification for entry to the Service which the Association had urged—three subjects at "O" level in G.C.E.—the question of raising the educational standard of entry should be considered in the future against their view that "the present standard is definitely too low". This question of educational standard is, of course, linked with that of career prospects, including the filling of vacancies in the Governor grades from within the Service. Here again the Committee had a measure of sympathy although they did not consider that the Association's view—that there should be a unified Service—could be accepted for implementation straight away.

The second guide given to the future was on the way in which pay and conditions should henceforth be determined. The broad principle relating future changes to those in the Civil Service—with an "escape clause" to cover exceptional circumstances—will provide a basis for negotiation which has been lacking in the past.

The Wynn-Parry Report certainly provided a basis for the future very different from the Stanholme Report of 1923. This, in effect, recommended an increase of 1s.0 per week for the officer grade, whereas the Wynn-Parry Report has led to marked improvement both in pay and career structure. It is by no means fanciful to state that one important reason for the differences between the two Reports was that on the most recent occasion there was an active, independent Association representing prison officers which was lacking in 1923.

It is strange in a way that virtually throughout the whole of the period between the two world wars, prison officers were denied the right of free men to form an effective organisation for the defence and advancement of their occupational interests. The right to have such an organisation had to be fought for and the fact that the memory of those struggles is still green—the Association celebrates its 21st birthday this year—helps to foster the spirit of interest in P.O.A. work which is so vitally necessary if the fruits of its labours are not to be complacently whittled away in the future.

There will certainly be ample scope for prison officers and for their Association in the years to come. We hope to see negotiation in respect of our pay and conditions based on a firm footing as a result of the principles laid down by the Wynn-Parry Committee and the opportunity for officers, both individually and as a body, to have their experience more fully used in the administration of an essential public and social service.