"Give us the tools . . ."

GORDON B. HARDEY

A plea for a clearer sense of direction, more staff training and better employer-employee relationships in the Prison Service.

WHILE IT IS A DIFFICULT task to form an accurate estimate of one's individual work-a-day environment, nevertheless students of any Union's history should not evade their responsibilities in this respect; for nobody else could ever really comprehend better than we ourselves what is going on now within the Prison Service. Our very familiarity with the job lays a responsibility on those of us who can use the printed word as a satisfactory medium to survey the past with a constant eye on the present and an occasional glimpse towards the future. However, the majority of us tend to take for granted all that we find in our working lives ignoring the fact that history not only gives us a clue to the present, by helping us to understand how our present situation arose, but also produces a satisfactory basis for comparing those essential differences that must exist between yesterday and to-day. Even to-day most of us never discover what we really think of our work in prisons, except under pressure of necessity. Yet, in the long history of the Prison Officer, conflicts of notable interest will be found at those points where the need of an employee who wanted to emphasise a personal opinion clashed with his duty to the employing body.

No contemporary assessment of a Prison Officer's work, stated in general terms, can ignore the sense of unity given him by his Union, in his private life, his work, and in the broad movements of civil service history. Here I would put in a special plea for a much wider sense of unity—though this may be looking far into the future—embracing everybody who works to help the misfits of our society. However, partisanship is the bugbear here! In consequence, we must be forever defending or attacking where differences of opinion arise, ignoring the plain fact that a bigoted defence of ideals and beliefs in prison reform does not indicate an established confidence in them. This can be taken as an apology in advance; for an argument will be put forward—but without bigotry—regarding what would seem to be a weakness within the present employer-employee relationship. Yet the Prison Officer who criticizes the fixed order should offer his criticism in the knowledge that, as an employee, he belongs to the order in a sense which others, outside

the prison service, do not. He can, consequently, take a few assumptions for granted, for he has a basis of personal commitment which obviously the members of, say, the Howard League for Penal Reform, and others outside the Service, have not.

The employing body has tried to speak in a language which the average employee can be expected to understand and comprehend through media with which they are familiar. Yet, in this matter, on the face of it, the employer does not appear to go deep enough. The various outlines of penal reform, passed down from employer to employee, lack clarity. To obtain understanding and interest from their staff is one thing—but it is entirely another matter to get the employee to respond to what is being conveyed to him to the extent that it "comes alive" sufficiently for him to feel something of the necessity of making up his mind about it. The impersonalisation of relationship between the employer and the employee still continues. There is something humiliating about this—it seems wrong to behave as if it did not matter whether the employee is valued as an individual or not, so long as he is accepted as an integral, though impersonal part, of a system of human relationships larger than himself—the employing body and the man's Union.

The Prison Officer at his work is concerned with the immediate practical outcome of all his actions. This is all of which he is capable under existing working conditions. It is true that in his work he is no longer in charge of prisoners on a treadmill, but this does not mean that any world shattering change for the better has taken place in the mental state of the prisoner who now sits on a bench in a prison workshop. Countless external arrangements in prison life are new, but, deep underneath in the small world where the prisoner is confined and where the prison staff work alongside him—what is new? Greed? Lust? Cruelty? Remorse? Selfishness? Pardon?—Are these new?

We need not stress the remote and now often irrelevant events which embittered other days, but we must rather study why we are still prepared to allow such impersonal relationships to exist. We must alter these long standing artificial habits and critically examine factors in these relationships that were never even considered before and which we are, even now, most reluctant to question. Instinctively, the writer doubts that an ordinary Prison Officer of the basic grade will be able to make the matter plainer or, indeed, very popular, but there are numerous humane considerations which appear so obvious that it ought not and should not be impossible to popularise them. However, as an ordinary basic grade Prison Officer, I must confess that I lack a coherent working hypothesis in the light of which to interpret my mass of facts; and, also, I do not possess an overall picture of the incidence of the factors I purport to be studying.

We may well ask then what stops the great penal reforming ideas of to-day from "coming acutely alive" in the minds of contemporary society? Unless we can dig deep down to the underlying causes of this failure no

attempt to make penal reforms more understandable and interesting will achieve much. It is, perhaps, worth speculating that, if our employers could succeed in understanding this apathy to penal reforms *outside* the Prison Service, they could come to a better understanding of the situation within the ranks of their own staff. It is axiomatic to say that those working in the Prison Service are intelligent people, just as much as those of the general public outside, and are subject to the same influences which condition belief.

To explain even briefly the most recent developments in penal reform is an undertaking which is completely outside the scope of this article. The most immediate impression gained by the basic grade Prison Officer is that of a Babel of often conflicting voices. This Babel seems not only to be confined to the expert and the employing body, or, even, to the various Government Departments but will be found to exist among Prison Officers in their close working relationships and also in their Union activities. Yet it is precisely all these indisciplines which should give the attentive and sympathetic employer a firm assurance of the undeniable vitality of the modern Prison Officer; for criticism, at whatever level, must come to be accepted as one of the necessary aspects of the reformative work we are all trying to do together in our different places.

Clearly, the present situation, if allowed to continue, will benefit no one. The problems must be referred to our employers, who should be able to understand and control the drift to further impersonalisation of relationships by accepting the challenge and seeking to act persistently in face of the realities. They must alter this whole impersonalizing process. If they do this they will be able to tackle the problem in reality and not merely temporise with the symptoms. What this will involve it is impossible to develop in detail; but it has become increasingly difficult for the modern Prison Officer to see the relevance of penal reform to his work. It is not easy for any intelligent employee to feel that he can do much with the guidance of rules and regulations that claim so much, but, in reality, have so little effect.

As a social service, the Prison Service is a "hotchpotch" of good intentions. In the general *melee*, good is undoubtedly being done for many unfortunates; but we all salve our consciences on the good that we are able to do and conveniently forget the good we do not do. And it is the good that we do not do which should be the test of our good intentions. William Booth wrote some seventy years ago: ". . . the rough and ready surgery with which we deal with our social patients recalls the simple method of the early physicians. In social maladies we are still in the age of the blood-letter and the strait waistcoat. The jail is our specific for despair. When all else fails society will always undertake to feed, clothe, warm and house a man, if only he will commit a crime." Of course, to-day, we also "reform" him if only he will commit a crime.

Major Lloyd George, when he was Home Secretary, said: "The members of the Prison Service are highly trained and variously specialised workers in what is, I

repeat, an essential and valuable social service. I want this to be recognised."

Mr. Fred Castell, the Assistant General Secretary of the Prison Officers' Association, has put it on record when he wrote: "Quotations in similar vein could be reeled off almost *ad infinitum*, but, it appears to be very, very doubtful whether these admirable speeches have penetrated to the realm where they might be translated into something practical i.e., the recognition by the Prison Commission that if they are to attract the right type of person into the Prison Service in sufficient numbers to permit the transformation into a social service to be made, they will have to do a lot of basic re-thinking about the conditions under which they hope to employ their social workers."

The Prison Commission must find a sense of direction and the easiest and quickest way is to examine the field of social service and find examples of better employer-employee relationships.

Here is one practical suggestion. After establishment the Prison Officer should be encouraged to study for a diploma in penology. He should be prepared to do this during the first ten years of his service until he is ready to take the vocational examination and so fit himself for promotion. When he obtains this diploma he should be allowed to gain practical experience, if necessary, at a School of Social Study. The diploma should not count for promotion nor should an allowance be payable. It should not take an officer off his normal duties. I will elaborate no further although the idea is so full of possibilities that it simply cries out to be written about; but I must be content with one last paragraph.

Despite all that has been said, it is true to say that the average Prison Officer is so affected by his present general conditions of work that he feels that without some over-zealous personal social purpose, penal reform, so far as he is concerned, must be considered a luxury—something which he prefers to keep to the realms of imagination. Put so crudely the statement seems almost absurd. But, how can the average Prison Officer hope to extract from so multifarious an experience, gained from practical day to day contact with criminals in penal custody, any common factor at all? Where, among the differing opinions that separate groups of interested parties proffer, can any clear cut pattern of thought appear, which will give the answer to his dilemma. To unfold large potentialities with insufficient local resources and to redress the abuses, which have already established themselves in every sphere of penal work, seems an almost impossible task. Yet, it is noteworthy that in every case where some measure of stability has been gained, the Prison Officer has been prepared to meet his commitments to his employer (and to society at the end of it all) and to play his part. This experience is common to all prison staffs. So, if the Prison Officer finds it hard at times to determine exactly what the employer (and society too for that matter) requires of him, he is not alone in his perplexity.