

Key Men

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MY INTENTION within this article is to examine the role of the prison officer. This subject seems to be very much a question of tradition and perception. I do not intend to write specifically about the training of prison officers, but I will use my experience in training prison staff as a window through which the subject may be viewed. In doing this it may well be that more questions will be asked than answered. This is, I feel, the way the subject should be approached. The role definition of any occupation should never be a matter of simple autocracy, or even of partial consultation. The views of every interested party should be given a hearing.

I began by saying that the role of the prison officer was a matter of tradition and perception. If this is so, then we are confronted with the problem of what the role was, and what it should be. Whilst both of these elements are likely to provide fertile areas of discussion it may be more fruitful to consider

the prison officer's potential, and the possibility of realising it in the existing social climate. It is important, in the first instance, to put the problem into perspective. I don't believe that the concept of a fuller role for the prison officer is a new phenomenon. And I believe the origin of the concept is multiple in the sense that circumstances have combined to bring this matter to a head at this moment in time. As a matter of simple progress the needs of any individual in society seem to tend towards personal advancement. However, it is important to appreciate that the prison officer's needs are not purely material or self-centred. They are interested in personal advancement, but they are also deeply concerned that the talents which are inherent in the grade should be utilised more fully, to the extent that their work is performed more successfully. I believe that this wish is genuine, and that it is necessary for this belief to be accepted before the

officer's role can be redefined.

In addition to the prison officer's own interest in his advancement, there seem to be four other main avenues of impetus driving them. I refer to:

1. Society which requires that criminals should be prevented from committing further crime. In the penal sense the ultimate in prevention implies a positive system of rehabilitation.
2. The prisoner, whose needs are apparent to all in contact with them.
3. The penal system itself, which at the present time is preoccupied with its own shortcomings.
4. A strong reaction against what sociologists, in their study of conflict groups, have described as "Contrast Conception". By improving his status and becoming more positive in his relationship with prisoners, the prison officer undoubtedly hopes to reduce the distance between himself and his charges; and by such means to ease the tensions and conflicts under which both groups labour.

Among the many motives inspiring the officer grade itself towards a redefinition of its role, I believe there is one primary factor. I refer specifically to job

satisfaction! In working with officers at the refresher courses in Wakefield, one quickly becomes aware of their frustrations and confusion. What are they supposed to be doing?

Perhaps this problem of role performance is created by the officer's inability to reconcile what appears to be an innate contradiction in goals. Is he to be a discipline officer, concerned mainly with matters of security and control? Or is he an individual to be involved mainly with rehabilitative work in a client centred community? It is important to emphasize here that the officer is not alone in his dilemma. No resolution of this problem is yet apparent. As yet our prison system is advancing upon a rather uncertain course, because of necessity it embraces a series of compromises. On the one hand prisons are expected to punish; but they are also expected to rehabilitate. They are required to discipline the unruly, and at the same time make such people more responsible. The problem of large case loads tend to make the machine impersonal, yet it demands that its relationships be more personal. Traditionally, most regimes are autocratic, but within this framework individual initiative is supposed to be nurtured. The paradox of imprisonment mounts under analysis because as yet we have no body of theory which can

clarify the fuzzy, nebulous, and as yet unresolved purpose of imprisonment.

Could it be that as a result of all this the prison officer has lost the one vital ingredient which makes any job worthwhile? I refer specifically to his expertise. In the past the officer was an expert. He was an expert in security, and adept at control. These two aims had a priority which overruled all others. The officer could be trained to pursue these twin goals effectively. And, what is more, the measure of his effectiveness could be given expression. If people didn't escape, then the prison officer was fulfilling his task as a security agent. If disturbances within establishments were kept at a minimum the officers were effectively maintaining good order. These responsibilities remain, but the security/treatment dichotomy has introduced new considerations which tend to inhibit his attainment of the traditional goal; but without providing the sense of achievement to be obtained by the successful pursuit of a different objective. Today the prison officer feels that his role has lost meaning, and in no area can he be regarded as being truly effective. This creates a situation ready made for discontent and conflict. Regrettably, one discovers on the development and refresher courses that, in post, officers quickly become confused because their

aspirations are not realised. This confusion shifts to disillusionment, and sometimes leads to apathy and regression. Continued failure to realise satisfaction which comes from the achievement of goals, may result in the dissipation of the desire of the officers to extend their effectiveness, and as a consequence may result in their concentrating their efforts in areas of least confusion—and I refer particularly to their traditional custodial function.

One of the other drives to develop the role of the prison officer which I mentioned is also motivated by needs separate from, although obviously identified with those of the officer. Successive administrations have sought to redirect the Prison Service towards a policy of positive rehabilitation. At first it was felt that this could be done by legislation and organisational changes. Gradually it was appreciated that such processes would only facilitate change, but would not, by themselves, achieve the desired end. The next phase in our development was an infiltration into other disciplines and the poaching of their techniques; and planting them into the penal field in the search for a treatment orientation which would satisfy the needs of the inmate, of society and of ourselves. But still our efforts have been largely unrewarded. So far we have succeeded in only liberalising, and humanising, some

of the worst features of our penal institutions. Development along these lines has raised the officer's aspirations but has not been effective enough to enable him to fulfil them.

Out of this emerges the one constant and incontrovertible truth! The officer's key position within any rehabilitative process has always been acknowledged, but it has never been fully realised. Over and over again the importance of the officer's role has been stressed—and unachieved. I am very anxious lest the cause of advancement for the prison officer becomes yet another emotional snowball, careering down the hill of good intention, growing in size, until it splinters and disintegrates because it lacks real substance. The development of the officer's role, and his training, must be based upon realism. Upon a true appreciation of his talents, and of the basic problems associated with his day to day tasks. It seems to me that the Prison Service having developed thus far empirically, should continue to do so; and inherent in this development is the definition of roles. A scientific and theoretical base to our work must be developed by research and experience, but the extension of knowledge gleaned from these sources into areas of practical work should be gradual and carefully thought out.

One of the things we believe we have discovered at the training

school is, that the officers we recruit into the service are, by and large, underachievers. Underachievers in the sense that they have not fully realised their potential in their previous walks of life. It is surprisingly easy within the various training syllabi to quicken their enthusiasm, raise their morale, and to offer them a level of aspiration well beyond that which they first anticipated, and which they are currently experiencing. There can be no doubt that the officer is eager to contribute more. But the problem for him is how? Where? And in what manner? In this connection there have been a variety of suggestions which may be summed up under the all-embracing heading of "Social Worker". Although I must confess that in relation to his specific role in a penal organisation I am at a loss to understand what this term means. However, for the sake of developing my argument, perhaps I can put forward a hypothesis for the training of prison officers as social workers, based upon the Younghusband report of 1959. This report classifies social workers into three categories. The first two categories classifications imply an expertise and training requirements beyond the level which could be expected within the bulk of officers at present recruited into the prison service, and the staff employed to train them. I believe that recognition of this (as far as the officers were concerned) was implicit within the P.O.A. memorandum

of 1963. Consequently we are left with a third category which seems to offer the most viable prospect of development for the officer's emergence as a "social worker".

Here the Younghusband report suggested that people could be trained as "welfare assistants" who would be a type of general purpose officer. It suggested that their training should embrace:

1. An understanding of common human needs and stresses.
2. Developing interviewing skills at elementary level.
3. Demonstrating the work of the department, and other relevant social services, and the importance of team work.
4. Training such workers to detect early signs of stress or other problems beyond their capacity to handle unaided.

In terms of training the prison officer the objects postulated by the Younghusband's recommendations appear to be perfectly reasonable. However, if we were to do this, I wonder if the officer's efforts with regard to prisoners would be more successful than they have previously been? I personally believe that this would not be enough, and that the prison officer in company with all other grades engaged upon work in the prison scene must develop a professionalism of his own, and one which is centred around his involvement with people in custody.

It seems to me that any development of the prison officer's role

must be considered in relation to the position of the inmates. We must first recognise that imprisonment in any form leads, ultimately, to a defacement of the personality structure. For me a crucial dilemma which tends to blur my thinking the problem beyond this fact. Before imprisonment, the majority of offenders, and the various law-enforcing bodies, are generally mutually uninhibited in their hostility towards each other. When imprisoned, however, the criminals are placed in an obviously defensive and subordinate position. Of necessity they must refrain from direct conflict expressions and divert these attitudes into more subtle, less obvious avenues. As a consequence the prisoners' hostility which is a natural result of their situation and rejection by society, finds outlet in criticism and castigation of the administration and all involved in it; and there is a general conspiracy of intensified intrigue against the administration on the part of most prisoners. How can any worker, however skilled, establish a proper helping relationship when confronted with this intangible but very real force. There is little real evidence that our attempts in this direction have achieved much success so far.

And this is not all! How can the officer do this in the face of philosophical concepts which themselves imply an innate contradiction of purpose? The principle of the indeterminate sentence

implies that many people anti-authoritarian in character must depend upon authority for decisions relating to their future. The problems of the short sentence men who can effectively block any attempt to examine the nature of their difficulties, by submerging themselves into the anaesthetic of the prison routine.

More fundamental still are the problems of the routine tasks which officers must perform. Very briefly, to underline my point, I refer to the problems of stripping and searching prisoners. At present a necessity, but one which exaggerates the conflict between officer and inmate. The reception of prisoners is another area, which makes the staff targets for prisoners' hostility; though the staff are, in fact, the helpless victims of a necessary routine. One could go on citing examples of philosophy and basic routine which effectively block any real bridging of the gap between staff and prisoners and consequently tends to negate our efforts to help them.

In conclusion, I ask would it not be better at this stage to concentrate on helping the officer to understand the nature of some of these difficulties first, and to teach him to do what he has to do well. This in itself is an enormous training problem, but one which I believe is a priority which should come before all others. Surely, before rushing into a hasty

marriage with different techniques, we must first harness the talent which is present within the officer grade to an aspirational level which he can achieve. I believe he should be helped to understand the nature of the environment in which he has to operate, and so, help him to work more effectively. Treatment is only possible where there is communication, and in order to achieve this, many of the obstacles which stand between the officer and his charges must first be removed. I have mentioned some of the obvious blockages; research would undoubtedly reveal many more.

All other grades in the service must realise that inevitably our destiny is linked with the officers. No matter how much expertise other people in the Prison Service may bring to their tasks, it must be really recognised that the major emphasis of staff/inmate contact will always remain in the hands of the officer. That anything else we do can only be a brief momentary insertion, which can be dissipated in seconds by a lack of empathy displayed by the officer grade. I am quite certain that they have the ability to develop their role considerably; but we have a responsibility to help them to set a level of development which is realistic. Realistic in terms of their own talents and abilities, in terms of the restrictions of the organisation, of the environment, and the nature of their duties.