

Inside Management

G. S. DOWELL

IN HIS ARTICLE entitled "Managing to Govern" in the July issue of the PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL, the author appears to have presupposed that an acute ailment afflicts the local administration of penal establishments and to have made an inaccurate diagnosis to justify his supposed remedy. It would be unfortunate if the article were allowed to create the impression that the condition described is widespread and cannot be eradicated except by such drastic surgery as is prescribed. It is unfortunate also that an article which evolves into an essay on prison management should do nothing to add to the dearth of information on, or contribute towards a better appreciation of, the role of the administration officer in a penal establishment.

It will be my aim, therefore, to rectify the omission and to show how, with adequate consultation and a proper realisation of the functions of the various members of the team, the present structure can be effective in furthering the objectives of the department and the establishment in particular.

It is unsatisfactory to refer, as your previous contributor has done, to the existence of a struggle

between governors and administration officers without giving the reader any indication of its nature except by its inclusion in the context of a discussion which implies that self-contained departments are to be found engaging in activities against the common interest. It is most certainly unreasonable to suggest that the participants would engage in such a struggle in such a way as to allow their own interests to impede the declared object of the Service, "to encourage and assist convicted prisoners to lead a good and useful life". I believe that most governors would reject the idea of a "struggle" or even peaceful co-existence, and would indeed acknowledge that they receive the full support and co-operation of their administration officers. There may be occasions of differences of opinion as to methods or the extent of the governor's authority, but obviously the administration officer must co-operate in carrying out the governor's directions, even though the matter may be one which directly affects the work or reflects the efficiency of his (the administration officer's) department.

We do, in fact, refer to the administration officer's department

for there are many functions, principally concerned with cash and stores accounting, where the administration officer presently exercises authority on behalf of the governor. It is this situation which gives rise to such controversy as has arisen, but, for the purposes of examination and to be charitable, we should concede that those who advocate delegation of authority in certain matters in direct line from the administrative and executive hierarchy at headquarters to the executive grades at outstations do so, first and foremost, in what they consider to be the interests of efficiency.

In considering the structural patterns of Civil Service organisations, it is usual to regard the general Civil Service classes as line, and the professional or specialist grades as staff. The line and staff concept of management is clearly in operation above outstation level, at which point, however, the pattern is broken by the introduction of a functional system, which may be perfectly proper from the custodial and treatment aspects but which (it has been suggested) should not necessarily be perpetuated in regard to the whole range of administrative functions.

Proposals like this are merely variations on the theme that a revision of the structure is necessary to enable governors to concentrate their attention on matters affecting their prime responsibility

for the custody and treatment of offenders. It in no way follows that assistant governors should take over the purely managerial functions relinquished, for surely they will better assist their governors, and incidentally fit themselves for their ultimate tasks by taking charge of specific cultural or recreational activities for the whole establishment and/or by supervising the life of a wing or house where they may effectively use their qualifications and training in developing treatment techniques and engage in the type of contact work for which they are recruited without concerning themselves with administrative detail, which may properly be left to the staff employed for this express purpose. It would have been useful and illuminating if the Royal Commission on the Penal System had survived to pronounce on these matters after assessing the overall situation in establishments, for there are certainly variations within the existing framework, and, while there may be some establishments where sectional interests appear to predominate, there are others where the team spirit produces a harmonious and effective working relationship.

I would not, therefore, presume to draw any conclusion as to whether a drastic reshaping is necessary or whether the requisite overall increase in efficiency can be achieved by minor modifications or by the universal application of techniques which are at

present found within the Service to be most effective. Before proceeding to elaborate the alternative, however, it is appropriate at this point to say a little more about the work of the administration officer's department. In short, it is to conduct the day-to-day business of the establishment, or, as "Penal Practice in a Changing Society" briefly but cogently puts it, "the steward and his executive and clerical staff help everybody by ensuring the smooth working of the prison management". This, surely, broadly implies administering to the needs of all departments. To illustrate how this is achieved in detail would result in a catalogue of executive and clerical duties, varied and interesting enough by Civil Service standards to the civil servants who perform them but of only incidental interest to those for whom the service is provided. Suffice it to say, therefore, that they are generally recognised as falling within the following broad categories: pay, cash accounting, industries and stores, staff and discipline wherefrom the role of the administration officer emerges variously as that of accountant and finance officer, purchasing and supplies officer, personnel officer and secretary.

If comparison is to be made with the Hospital Service, similarities will certainly be found between the role of the administration officer in a penal establishment and that of a hospital secretary, who is

responsible (to the group secretary) for the day-to-day management of an individual hospital or a subgroup of hospitals. Hospital administration, however, is recognised as a profession in its own right, its members represented by a professional association, the Institute of Hospital Administrators.

Administration officers are officially appointed from members of the executive grades in the Home Office and, in practice, officers are selected with considerable experience in the type of work which they will supervise. In this respect, perhaps, the post may be regarded as specialised, but we must beware of using the term, "specialist", as it would be equally logical to argue that, in the usual Civil Service sense, of all the staff employed in penal establishments the executive and clerical grades are the only non-specialists.

The inescapable fact is, of course, that all are civil servants who, in performing their particular tasks, operate within the circumscribed limits of rules, orders and procedural instructions. That this may at times lead to frustration or temporary setbacks is understandable, but regulations are necessary in any government department to secure uniformity or for other good reasons, not least of which are to safeguard against the introduction of ill-considered schemes and to prevent the indiscriminate use of public money. It is in this

connection that the three watch-words of the administrator: policy, precedent and finance, are to be observed, but they need not stifle initiative or enterprise altogether, for, in the first place, an efficient administrative machine provides for the flow of inspiration in an upward direction and, in the second place, there is a wide area of discretion left to local management decision.

It is, of course, a mis-use of resources to fail to allow the expression of expert opinion where this is available. No governor, I think, would make up his mind on a works matter, for instance, without consulting his senior works officer; on a medical matter, his senior medical officer; or on a finance matter, his administration officer. This may be done by discussion with the individual concerned, by internal memorandum or—and this seems to be the current trend—he may raise the matter at a meeting of heads of sections, who, on their part, may wish to bring up for discussion other matters perhaps falling outside their normal routine or when the interests of other parties are affected. Differences of opinion, of interpretation, or of emphasis do indeed arise at local level and it is often advantageous to have these aired in a group or committee atmosphere rather than by conducting a series of separate interviews with staff concerned. There evolves from such meetings, without any radical change in the structure or

drastic role reappraisal, a management system the merits of which are being increasingly recognised.

In many establishments this has arisen from the logical development of the "knitting party" which took place each morning, originally with perhaps only three or four participants, for example, the governor, the administration officer and the chief officer, but which, with the advent of so many specialist grades, has profitably been extended to make the optimum use of consultation as warranted by the particular type of establishment.

At my own establishment, for example, if I may be forgiven for quoting it, such a meeting takes place daily under the chairmanship of the governor (medical superintendent in this case) and usually attracts 10 or more heads of sections or their representatives and, because of the special treatment situation at Grendon and the frequent need to discuss cases of special interest, the chief officer in charge of the hospital and usually three or four of the wing principal officers will also attend. Occasionally any official visitors who may be in the establishment are also invited. The morning meeting does not displace the close liaison which is normally sustained between governor, administration officer and chief officer, nor does it supersede any of the more usual avenues of consultation. Decisions may be deferred for further consultation between interested parties, or

matters referred to a fortnightly uniformed staff meeting, monthly general staff meeting or quarterly consultative committee meeting if appropriate. The proceedings are informal, attendance is not compulsory, no minutes are taken and the meeting does not pretend to reach unanimous or even majority decisions. The governor, in fact, retains the over-riding authority and final responsibility as, of course, he must do under the existing formal structure.

This is perhaps a long way from what advocates of the management of penal establishments by boards of management have in mind, but it is at least a method of employing the management technique of co-ordinating the views of individuals affected, and a means of ensuring that the whole picture is seen by all, so that each may readily identify his allotted place and assume no pretensions to expertise outside his true assignment, even though he will inevitably acquire a measure of appreciation of other professional techniques which may assist him to inform his own judgments. In an establishment practising novel methods of treatment involving a high degree of inmate participation and in an exceptionally permissive regime, it has been thought essential to counter the resultant stresses on staff and organisation by the maximum consultation and dissemination of information that time and the staffing situation allow, so that involvement in the therapeutic

principle affects all grades, and we have a situation where it becomes as automatic to consider administrative acts in relation to their effects on treatment as treatment proposals in the light of their administrative consequences.

Although Grendon is an exceptional case, there will be other establishments where similar considerations apply in varying degrees and some where it could be claimed that effective management has been achieved under the existing structure similarly adapted. There are, of course, disadvantages associated with committee systems and, in the result, the efficiency of any system of lower or middle management may be judged on the wisdom of the decisions made within its discretion and the constructiveness and feasibility of its proposals.

One's own view is apt to be influenced by the methods and attitudes adopted at one's own establishment, and it would not be proper to impose my own conclusions. If it is accepted, however, that there is a need for change in the local administration of penal establishments and that the climate is right for it, then it is necessary to be aware of its present actualities and potentialities. It would certainly seem to be a prerequisite to any change, to dispel some presently held misconceptions as to role and function. It may then be simply a matter of appreciating how the present resources can be properly applied to their full effect.