

# Work for Prisoners

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IT WAS as long ago as 1933 that the last review of prison employment was conducted by a body drawn from outside the Prison Service. Since then there have been big changes both in prisons and in the pattern of industry throughout the country, and the need for a fresh study of the subject was felt. Early last year, therefore, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland appointed the Advisory Council on the Employment of Prisoners to be a standing advisory body with terms of reference covering all matters of consequence relating to the employment of prisoners and borstal inmates. The full terms of reference were as follows:—

"To be a standing council to advise on the organisation and management of industries in prisons and borstals, including the supply of sufficient and suitable work; the development of other forms of employment for inmates; the industrial training of inmates; and related questions".

The Council is essentially a body

of industrialists (in the widest sense) rather than penologists. The Chairman is Sir Wilfred Anson who until a little while ago was Deputy Chairman of the Imperial Tobacco Company. He is also a Justice of the Peace and has a wide range of interests especially in education. Both sides of industry are strongly represented and there are two Members of Parliament, one from the Government side of the House of Commons and one from the Opposition benches. Representatives of the Prison Commission, the Scottish Home Department and the Ministry of Labour have been appointed Assessors to the Council.

The Council were faced at the outset with an almost bewildering number and variety of questions and topics on which their advice was needed. Here are only a few of them. What are the most suitable kinds of work for prisoners serving sentences ranging from a week or two to several years? Is there enough suitable work available? How, in the light of modern developments in industry, should

prison industries be organised? Can work in prisons be made a valuable part of the general training of prisoners? Should prisoners be given incentives to work well and if so what incentives? Are borstal boys being given the right kind of vocational training courses?

When the Council met for the first time, hardly any members had special knowledge of the penal system. Their first task, therefore, was to make themselves familiar at first hand with conditions in prisons and borstals. During the past year or two they have paid many visits to many different establishments either individually or as sub-committees of the Council charged with some special subject of investigation. For the most part it is by dividing itself into sub-committees that the Council has proceeded with its inquiries. This has enabled the Council to cover a great deal of ground by studying different subjects simultaneously. Every member of the Council has been a member of at least one sub-committee and many of more than one.

The fruits of the first year's activity—it might fairly be called intense activity—were presented to the Home Secretary and to the Secretary of State for Scotland in the form of the Council's first report. This has since been published and is on sale through H. M. Stationery Office.

The report shows clearly what subjects the Council have been studying and what conclusions they have reached. They decided to concentrate first on what seemed to be the biggest and perhaps most important group of problems, namely, those relating to the employment of male prisoners in prison workshops. This meant leaving until later the detailed consideration of such matters as non-industrial employment, extra-mural employment, work for women and for borstal inmates, and vocational training.

After an introductory section the report sets out briefly the relevant facts about conditions in prisons as the Council found them. They were shocked in local prisons by the serious effects of overcrowding, old, unsuitable buildings and a shortage of staff upon the employment of prisoners.

"The results are that prisoners' working hours in some general local prisons are as few as sixteen hours a week; that even during these short hours prisoners are removed from the workshops for various other prison purposes, such as bathing, and interviews; and that the development of better types of work is gravely hindered. This is a grim picture but the very large prison building programme gives hope for the future; and we feel sure that even in present conditions much can be done to improve prison

industries". (Paragraph 18 of "Work for Prisoners").

The Council found much better conditions in open, regional and central prisons, but even there they found room for improvement.

In Section III of the report the Council make a brief incursion into the philosophy of work for prisoners. They were aware of the existence of a number of different and, for the most part, mutually contradictory ideas about work for prisoners. At one extreme, for example, there was the old and now, surely, universally discredited idea that work was part of a prisoner's punishment; and, at the other extreme, that work is a right enjoyed by every prisoner. The Council took a line of their own:—

"We believe, first, that the fundamental reason why prisoners should work is that every person should make the best contribution he can to the community; secondly, that suitable work, if properly organised, is a most valuable part of a prisoner's training; and, thirdly, that prisoners represent a considerable labour force which ought not to be wasted". (Paragraph 23).

The report goes on to elaborate the second of these propositions which, in the Council's view, is and will remain the basis of their whole approach to work for prisoners.

The Council believe very firmly, in the potential value of work as training. The reasons for their belief are essentially simple. If they say in effect, you want to give a prisoner the best possible chance of going straight on leaving prison, you have got to make it as easy as possible for him to get *and keep* an honest job. It is no solution merely to find a job for him and push him into it. If he cannot do the job he will either get dismissed or will leave of his own accord, dispirited and more than ever convinced that his line is crime.

No, the Council say, if you want a man to work honestly on discharge from prison, you must get him used in prison to the sort of work that is most likely to be available to him outside. That means chiefly two things; he must be given a good hard day's work in prison, and he must be got accustomed to the sort of work that is most common in modern industry. Moreover, this work must be organised and carried out in prison workshops in the same way as in modern factories.

This is what the Council mean by saying that suitable work, if properly organised, is a most valuable part of a prisoners' training. It follows from this that, if work is to be any good as training, prison industries must be run efficiently. The Council do not consider the present level of efficiency to be nearly high enough. Among other things the tempo in

workshops must be greatly increased; one member of the Council has said that a prisoner accustomed to the tempo of most prison workshops would be completely bewildered on going to work in a normal factory.

The Council, therefore, invite the prison authorities to face this question: is the potential training value of good work for prisoners worth the price which must be paid for it, i.e., "priority for a big effort to raise efficiency" in prison industries? The Council point out that they, not being penologists, are not competent to answer this question, but they emphasise that a definite answer must be given: "... it is no more possible in prisons than outside them to have well-run industries if there is uncertainty about whether or not industrial efficiency should be subordinated to other considerations". (Paragraph 29).

What the Council mean by "priority for a big effort to raise efficiency" is, in effect, enough devotion—or diversion—of effort and resources to ensure the implementation of the recommendations contained in Section V of the report and onwards. Before coming to these recommendations, however, the Council consider in Section IV what is suitable work for prisoners and whence it may be obtained. The question of suitable work is one of some importance on which there is plenty of scope for diverse opinions,

and some of the Council's views may not be readily acceptable to everyone. Believing as they do that work has a positive part to play in the training of prisoners, they naturally condemn any idea that the purpose of work is merely to keep prisoners innocently occupied and hence that the kind of work does not matter. The Council think that, on the contrary, it is of great importance that good, clearly purposeful work be provided. "Clearly purposeful" means that the prisoners themselves should know that their work really is put to good use.

The Council consider that the most suitable work for the great majority of prisoners is fairly simple repetitive work on production lines, such as is found in many modern factories. This may not attract general agreement. Some people may take the view that such work offers little personal satisfaction and is too monotonous in prison conditions. But the Council had heard such views expressed before coming to their own conclusions. They adhere to their main point, which is that prisoners cannot be expected to lead honest lives on discharge unless they have been accustomed in prison to working normal hours at a typical industrial job in typical factory conditions. The Council add:

"Moreover, we consider that the monotony of the work we recommend can easily be exagger-

ated: there may well be more satisfaction to be gained from such work if it is well-organised in good conditions than from desultory work of the handicraft type. And in many prisons it is no longer a fact that outside his working hours a prisoner spends most of his time in his cell. We see every reason, with the facilities which are being increasingly provided for prisoners to spend their leisure hours together, why they should be expected to do the same sort of work as that performed by great numbers of free men and women". (Paragraph 47).

The Council do not consider there need be any great difficulty in getting suitable work of the kind they recommend. They are satisfied that other Government departments could give ample work to prisons and would do so provided that prison industries demonstrated their ability to turn out work of good quality on time. Here, the Council say, is another reason for improving the efficiency of prison industries: as in the case of private industry, a plentiful supply of work to prison industries is dependent on efficiency.

The Council consider briefly the question of competition between the work of prisoners and the work of free men. They think it at least as important that prisoners should not be idle and a charge on the

community as it is in the case of free men. They point out that the prison labour force is only a tiny fraction of the total working population of the country, and express confidence that sufficient suitable work for prisoners can be found without its having any appreciable effect on the interests of employers and workers outside prisons.

The Council regard with approval the performance of work in prisons for private employers at the market rate for the job. They feel that this helps to maintain desirable links between prison industries and industry outside.

In Section V of their report the Council make various general recommendations for improving the efficiency of prison industries and in Sections VIII to X there are similar recommendations relating to particular industries. The first group of recommendations in Section V deal with ways of improving the industrial organisation in prisons. The second group relate to the general prison regime as it affects the efficiency of prison industries. The Council draw attention to the fact that the efficiency of prison industries depends a great deal on factors outside the control of the industrial staff. Among other things, the Council recommend that every effort should be made where necessary (i.e., chiefly, in the local prisons) to increase prisoners'

working hours to what is normal in modern industry, and that interruptions in working hours and the labour turnover in workshops should be cut to the minimum.

Sections VI, VII and XI deal with special subjects which the Council have studied, namely, job training, prisoners' earnings and local advisory committees on the employment of prisoners. Space permits here only a brief reference to the Council's recommendations on these complex subjects. The Council consider that much more attention should be paid to job training, i.e., the training of prisoners for work in prisons; that the prisoners' earnings scheme should be drastically revised to provide for more flexible incentive payments to prisoners; and that local advisory committees on the employment of prisoners should be appointed at the larger prisons situated in industrial areas.

Section XII of the Council's report relates to Scotland. Of course, practically the whole of the report applies to Scotland as much as to England and Wales, but Section XII deals with matters peculiar to Scotland.

The report has provided much food for thought. Many of the recommendations are not such as can be fully implemented at once: they call for progressive development over a long period. Action has already been taken in England and Wales and in Scotland on the recommendations about prisoners' earnings and a new system of payments was introduced last August. The Council's recommendations about local advisory committees have also been put into effect by the appointment of committees at Liverpool, and Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds prisons, and similar action is being taken in Scotland.

Such is the Council's first report. It will be clear from this brief account that what the Council have to say is of considerable interest to all who are concerned in the running of prisons.

Since the preparation of their first report the Council have turned their attention to other problems within their terms of reference. At present they are studying the employment of borstal boys with particular reference to vocational training.