

Comment

The Future of the Special Secure Units

At the time of writing, the Inquiry into the Special Secure Unit at HMP Whitemoor has not reported but it seems unlikely that it will recommend abolition of the units. It is probable that it will recommend more to be spent on physical security, procedures to be tightened and increased technology used for surveillance. But even if all that is done and for it to be done may take time: the introduction of x-ray machines after the Brixton escape was not achieved overnight. Still we shall depend upon the human element. Someone somewhere noting promptly that something isn't quite as it should be and taking appropriate action or telling someone about it. All the technology will not replace the need for vigilance and alertness to be maintained at all times. And that need for vigilance at all times is an issue that the Inquiry needs to address. How do staff maintain readiness and a sense of awareness in routines carried out day after day? As one officer remarked, "the job is an ocean of boredom interspersed with an occasional island of sheer fucking terror!" One way of dealing with it is through frequent changes of duty but that is limited in its effect and works against continuity amongst staff. What it also militates against is the notion of dynamic security. The idea of staff getting to know their charges through, for example, personal officer schemes but such schemes have never seemed appropriate to the SSU and the traditional barriers between staff and prisoner have always been maintained. In part that has been because those prisoners in the SSU have been members of close knit groups outside prison who would have nothing to do with "officials" anyway. And what is also lost is the informant. In the same way that most crimes are solved not by brilliant deductive method but by confession so most escapes are foiled not by "intelligence" but by the "note in the box" from someone who doesn't want the boat rocked. The SSU precludes that happening because for as much as it provides staff with opportunities to observe prisoners so it does equally for prisoners to observe each other and staff. In contrast in the main prison there are many legitimate opportunities for prisoners to speak to staff out of earshot. Indeed, prison life could not continue without the prisoner calling at the office to collect a newspaper, an application form or going to see someone about delayed mail or a visit not turned up and

doing so out of sight of other prisoners so that the nudge and wink about which cell to search and when can be given. It is arguable that the prisoners who got out of the SSU at HMP Whitemoor would not have done so had they been housed in the main prison. In the main prison they would have been rumbled by someone who was not in their control and word would have got out. For that to be so prisons need to be places where staff and prisoners interact. Where prisoners see staff as significant in their lives and care what they think and do. That of course needs to be reciprocated and in part that is what involving staff in sentence planning and programmes addressing offending behaviour is about. What is termed dynamic security. It is dependent upon staff having discretion to make decisions which matter to prisoners albeit within limits set by the governor. There is a challenge to that traditional way of running prisons in the wilder fancies of the press following revelations about what staff have allowed prisoners and the use of discretion has been questioned. The talk has been that governors should be allowed no discretion in running prisons. They should be martinets slavishly following rules.

Could that be achieved? For how long would staff and prisoners see as reasonable the rigid application of rules with no exceptions whatever the individual circumstances. And if those carrying out the rules do not see their application as reasonable, what chance is there of consistency. Would the courts accept that the principles of natural justice need not apply and that the reasons for decisions need no longer be given. As likely a scenario as that courts would give up individualising sentences. So too an escape-proof prison is a vain hope but what needs to be recognised is that the human factor cannot be ignored and it is more effective to work with it than to attempt to remove it by technology or blind obedience to a set of rules.

Is that possible to do in the peculiar atmosphere of the special unit? It will be vital to the future of the units that the Inquiry is able to recommend ways of employing staff in a positive role otherwise the human factor may once again be the source of embarrassment ■