

# Whatever happened to 'The Governor'?

David Wilson looks at the changing nature and role of the prison governor.

Let me start by describing two conversations that I had recently with a friend and a former colleague who both still work as prison governors. In the first I was eager to question my friend about the implications of the Prisons-Probation Review as he saw them. He was very upbeat about the review (perhaps because he saw new career opportunities emerging), and in thinking back to the 'old days' of probation staff seconded into prisons he commented that "well there were always problems, and anyway I can't afford a 'secular conscience' any more". In the second meeting I started by asking the governor, who had taken over a new prison six months previously, how things were going. He too was upbeat - "corners had been turned", "new brooms were sweeping clean" and "stones were being lifted" - all clichés familiar to the language of taking charge. However as if to confirm all that he had just said he turned to his

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colleague who had only joined us a few moments previously, and who sat listening intently. The governor's views were duly endorsed, and we were then introduced. I asked the late arrival what he did in the prison. "Oh," he replied, "I'm the accountant".

## Direction and meaning

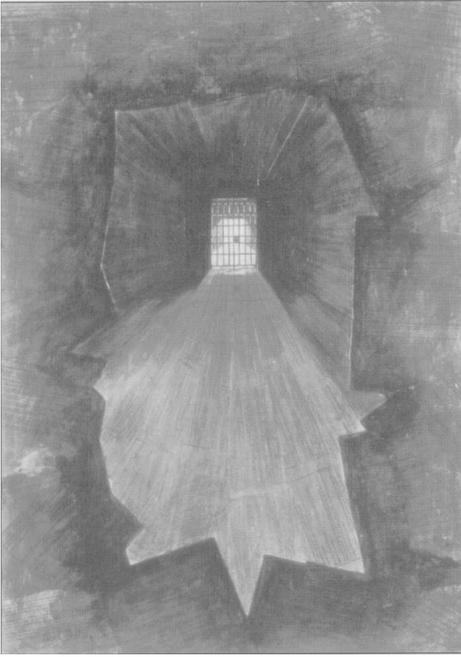
Surprisingly of these two stories, the first is probably the most revealing about the current state of the Prison Service. At its heart my friend was describing not one, but two forces that shape the direction of the Prison Service generally, and his prison in particular. The phrase 'I can't afford' reminds us that with the Prison Service becoming a Next Steps Agency in April 1993 various responsibilities, including budgets, were devolved from the centre to individual establishments. This in turn meant that financial awareness training became one of the most fashionable courses to attend at this time, and that in due course it was inevitable that accountants would be added to the staff profile. However the second part of the phrase used by this governor is filled with meaning. To describe the seconded probation officer as a 'secular conscience' is to remind us that in the past governors looked to probation officers (and also chaplains and medical officers) as a voice from outside of the prison's walls, which by its very nature spoke about matters that might otherwise get lost in the day-to-day anxieties and hurly-burly about staffing numbers, escorts, security and costs. The fact that this governor no longer felt that he could afford a 'secular conscience' in my view reflects a diminution of the governor's role, who is in danger of simply becoming 'another manager', massaging costs to keep the business plan on target, and ensuring that the key performance indicators (KPI) are

delivered appropriately.

## Working credos

In all of this I am reminded that Andrew Rutherford (1994) discovered three working credos in his discussions with criminal justice professionals. At their heart these credos concerned the values that the person brought to the job, and whilst not a precisely defined ideology, the personal experiences of his interviewees became woven into how they went about their work. The first credo related to a powerful dislike and moral condemnation of offenders; the second concerned a desire to dispose of the tasks at hand as smoothly and efficiently as possible; and the third credo was characterized by an empathy with offenders, and an optimism about the work that could be done with offenders. Credo Two - a pragmatic, managerial approach, which does not look at the broad picture or the overall direction that is being taken by the organization - is clearly in the ascendant, with Credo One, whilst rarely publicly expressed, is an ever-present reality. It is the Credo Three practitioner who is becoming less visible and harder to find; the person who is prepared to search out a 'secular conscience', and see their value in pushing forward how the prison works and operates by looking at the broad picture and seeing bigger trends at work than the latest KPI. I used to call this person 'The Governor', but that was before the 'Managers' took over the job.

Some time ago (1995) I wrote 'Against The Culture of Management - a Personal Polemic to re-invent *The Governor*', and spurred on by reaction to that article published with Shane Bryans (1998), now Governor of HMYOI Aylesbury, a book about prison governors. In this book we deliberately set out to make a case that governors were not just another type of manager, but had to use skills and



qualities that made doing the job different from managing Tesco's or Marks and Spencers, and that as a consequence the people who did the job weren't simply managers in the accepted sense of the word, but much more besides. They were *sui generis* - unique and special - and what made them so was the special nature of prison and penal culture. To work as a governor you had to understand prisoners, and be able to manipulate prison life to push it forward. This was not so much about management - or to further managerial ends - but to fashion and re-shape an essentially punitive structure into one that was positive and optimistic. That broad, philosophical goal transcended all others, and it is a pity that it now simply exists in a 'Mission Statement' that bears little resemblance to the work that goes

on inside, or who prison governors are becoming.

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#### References

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