

# Managerialism, privatisation and the prison scene

Dave McDonnell describes the positive influence of the private sector on prison management.

During the 30 years I have worked in prisons a large number of reports and inquiries have been written about the Prison Service or individual prisons. From *Mountbatten* (1966) to *Learmont* (1995), both who wrote about major security breaches in our prisons, many words have been written about how the Prison Service and prisons should be managed. Admiral Lygo, in his report on the management of the Prison Service (1991), described the issue of leadership as "first and fundamental". *The Woolf Report* (1990) says "there is a profound desire for more visible leadership". There is of course a difference between leadership and management. A leader is seen as prominent and influential, whilst a manager is controlling, conducting

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with skilful use of resources.

'Fresh start' was a great opportunity for the Prison Service to flatten management structures, streamline systems and be accountable for the local area of responsibility. In my view politicians and senior managers were so pleased to at last have direct control over the overtime costs of the Prison Service, that other opportunities were lost.

## Governing the governor

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*The Criminal Justice Act* (1991) was the act used to introduce private sector management to the United Kingdom prison system. Whilst it entitled the governor's role as 'Director' how were these directors (and their staff) going to manage prisons differently? Certainly this was unlikely to happen through training as all of the people to date who have been directors have all previously been managers or governors in the Prison Service.

All private prisons have a budget; there is not a bottomless pit, as some people would have us think. The director, like the governor, is accountable for everything that happens in their prison. I certainly did not join the private sector after many years in the Prison Service just to run a prison for less cost. I was looking for opportunities and the flexibility of operation to help achieve the contracted outcomes. Whilst we manage our prisons through the Prison Service and several private companies, I believe it is the

environment that we are managed in ourselves and the customer's (the Government's) requirements that dictate the style and differences that are to be found.

## Accountability

The primary job of management is to establish requirements, provide the wherewithal to meet them and then spend all its time getting the requirements met. The requirements for all of us (private and public) in management come from our contracts, key performance targets, financial control and other key business issues.

I remember being asked by some of my public sector colleagues (who had been very critical of the then Director General of the Prison Service) what the difference was between the private and public sector. I told them that if I had been as publicly critical of my Chief Executive Officer as they had been of theirs I would be looking for another job.

Five years ago when the Security Group were rewriting the Prison Services manual of security they used the word 'mandatory' - little did they know how contagious it would become.

Whilst a manual of security has to be prescriptive about some standards, in some sections the outcome required was defined, but the process to achieve this left to governors. Many amendments have tended to reduce the outcomes based approach and put more detail in about process. The process based system is now replicated (like the word mandatory) across all Prison Service orders. These in most cases apply equally to the public and private sector alike. Mandatory processes makes certain that we are all accountable for ensuring uniformity of the system. The down side to this is that innovation is stifled.

## Auditing

It is a known fact that one of the best ways of keeping in touch with what is happening in your prison and communicating with staff and prisoners is to manage by walking

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about. This is part of the visible leadership referred to by Woolf (1990). So why would Woolf make such a recommendation? I believe that this refers to the difficulty the governor has in being seen as the person who has control over decision making. The number of layers of management a prisoner has to go through to identify if the governor is aware of a decision, or has indeed made the decision personally, are cumbersome. Walking around the prison on ‘rounds’ is in itself not enough. Using this as an opportunity to audit the quality of the prison’s management and to find out if what is supposed to be achieved is as required is also crucial.

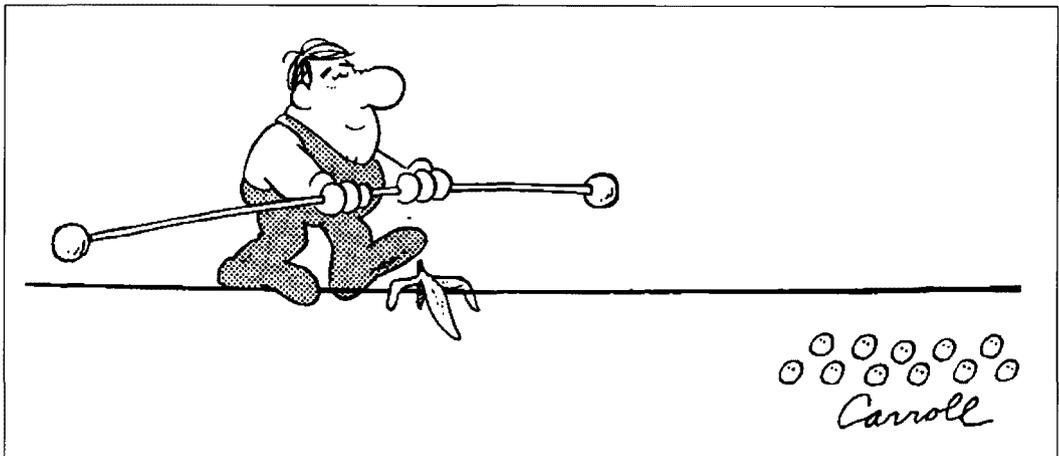
To assist this audit you need to know what requirements you have to conform to.

We have national, area, company, contractual, Prison Service orders and standard, as well as personal or departmental targets. This adds up to a giant audit paper trail. The flexibility of operation advantage that a director has over a governor starts to be reduced at

this point. I accept that monitoring is necessary to enable management of the outcomes. However, to spend an excessive amount of time auditing can be counter productive.

Since 1991 a great deal of positive change has taken place in the Prison Service, most of this as a result of the influence the private sector has had in prison management. We should now all work closely together to ensure our prisons are managed competently and efficiently.

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Carroll Zahn