

# The Probation Service and Managerialism

Sue Wade looks at the impact of managerialist culture on the Probation Service.

A recent annual 'strategic management' event for senior managers in probation services and their equivalent Home Office officials produced a variety of management styles and areas of concern. A common feature was the dominance of the language of managerialism and attention to the mechanisms of change management and performance management. Sentencing philosophy, the social exclusion / inclusion agenda, community justice developments and practice quality were not much in evidence.

This may be a harsh commentary, particularly as the two day event was justifiably dominated by the huge structural change represented by the centralisation / nationalisation of probation services, due in April 2001. Ministerial attention to, and scepticism about, the ability of probation to enforce its own orders is also a threat which has produced close attention to performance figures and a commitment to manage down the variations between services.

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## A new direction

These external drivers are matched by an internal world rich in examples of well developed managerialist culture. The combination of a growth in managerial processes and the highly structured evidence-based practice initiative (What Works) may be producing the 'holy grail' for past critics of probation — the end of a social justice orientation and practitioner discretion and the beginning of a North American style of processing offenders. Changing behaviour through building relationships in local communities is replaced with probation law enforcement and rigid assessment / treatment methodologies which are applied across probation and prison regimes and pay little attention to community and diversity. The irony is that this new direction for the UK comes at the same time as a re-emergence in North American / community justice practice and the reduction of interest in tagging and other impersonal offender processing methods of supervision.

## Probation and managerialism

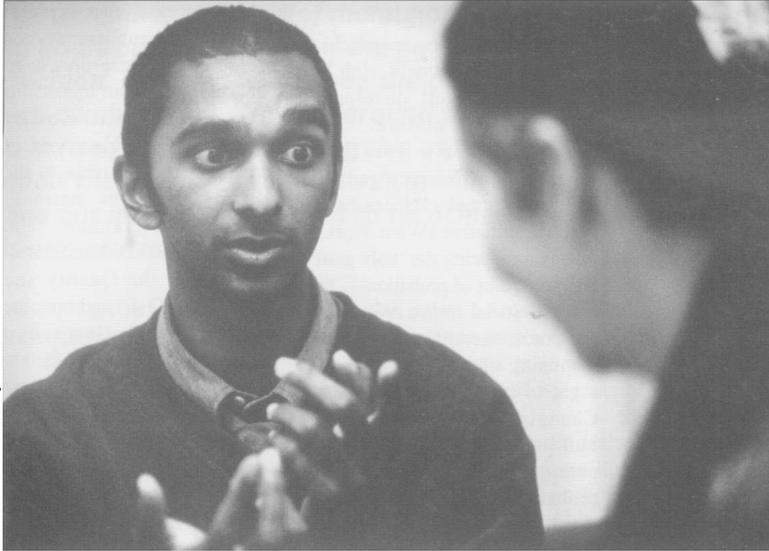
Managerialist developments in the probation service are reasonably similar to those in other public services, although the onset was a little later for probation. 1985 saw the first Home Office plan with objectives and priorities but it was the late 1980s before serious attention was given to outcomes and performance reports. 'Management by Objectives' was 'taught' to all probation services by Home Office funded consultants. 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPI's) and 'Supporting Management Information Needs' (SMIN's) were set nationally. These all required extensive reporting mechanisms and were almost entirely quantity output measures. Outcome measurement in the form of reconviction rates is only just available ten years later and is a national measurement. Two measures of stakeholder satisfaction are included but using a very raw overall satisfaction rate

derived from out of date samples. No user surveys, public surveys or more qualitative measures have been included in the increasing number of indicators. The use of inspection and audit as levers of control began to increase in the early 1990s with national inspection programmes, the Efficiency and Effectiveness (E+E) growing into the Quality and Effectiveness (Q+E) and now the Performance Inspection Programmes (PIP). All probation services are inspected in a rolling programme and comparative performance tables concentrating on the KPIs and unit costs are published. Most services are now involved in two or three internal inspections and three or four external ones each year in addition to the KPI and SMINs reporting. A scrutiny of the annual plans and annual reports of each probation service shows that most have over 50 objectives or performance indicators which they are measuring. In similar fashion to the national ones, these concentrate on quantity outputs.

The advent of Better Quality Services (BQS) as our equivalent of Best Value, and the new National Directorate is likely to increase the levels and range of required performance information and to demand more and more management time in data interpretation and implementation of consequent action plans — a rather neat example of Cohen's iatrogenic loops (Cohen 1979).

The use of management tools can of course be essential, particularly in providing consistent high quality public services at the most efficient cost. Just as in other public services, the probation service of old was a fairly complacent unresponsive monolithic structure which sometimes delivered an excellent service, but sometimes did not, and often didn't know when either happened. However the change towards a modern public service has required leadership and stewardship as well as managerialism.

Matthew Taylor (Institute of



Public Policy Research) in a speech to the probation 'strategic management' event at Cranfield 2000 criticised the current government modernisation programme as lacking a change model. "Modernisation's reliance on managerialism as a change model is not sufficient. It doesn't look at cultural change and individual worker / practitioner ownership of change". Paul Bate in *Strategies for Cultural Change* says on leadership "to control things is an act of power not leadership for 'things' have no motives. Power wielders may treat people as 'things', leaders may not."

### **Community justice and correction**

The great debate for the probation service should be the relative importance of community justice versus correctional orientation. The tensions between the two approaches are likely to increase particularly with the developments

stemming from the Crime and Disorder Act strategies and the imminent announcement of a mechanism to introduce seamless sentences. The former increases probation's connections to local authorities and crime prevention / community safety initiatives. The latter requiring closer links with the prison service, prison sentences possibly becoming the *raison d'être* of the probation service.

Managerialism as a method of controlling or directing an organisation does not predetermine the outcome of those two competing orientations. Examples are of course present in organisations on both sides of the philosophical divide.

Managerialism's problem is that it can become a pretty efficient way of implementing a direction decided by others, with senior managers participating in the debates about how rather than what and why. A truly strategic discussion does need to cover the range of philosophy, purpose, culture and practice as well as change and performance management.

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