

Managerialism in the Probation Service: for good or for bad?

Judy McKnight looks at the impact of central control on the Probation Service.

“Patronised, bullied and betrayed” was how a recent *Guardian* article articulated the views of a vast range of public servants, including probation staff:

“Throughout the public sector, all those on whom targets were imposed have gradually found themselves working in systems that largely reduce them to impotent cogs in machines. Millions who once took great pride in their work no longer have much autonomy in how they do it. That makes them sullen or enraged, because they know how the restrictions on them are distorting the jobs they should be doing” (Russell, 2006).

I don't intend to come down on one side of the argument 'managerialism – right or wrong?' My own view is that there is a place for legitimate managerial direction from government, with legitimate targets and performance measurement.

The trick, as always, is to find the right balance so that 'localism' and the scope for local initiatives, both of which are essential to effective probation practice, are not stifled and lost.

I would draw two conclusions from the history of the Probation Service to date:

- Firstly, that all forms of centralised controls, targets or structural reforms that are introduced should be based on an evidenced approach to demonstrate their effectiveness.
- Secondly, no measures will succeed if they ignore the role and concerns of staff in the Service and if they do not have “staff buy-in.”

Central / local tensions over the years

Probation historians tend to pick the mid-1980s as the period when the Service started increasingly to come under central government control and local autonomy began to be constrained by the new managerialist approach.

Increased central control has also been accompanied by a changing role for the Service, a change summarised by Julian Buchanan in the *Probation Journal Blog* in March 2006. He states:

“The shift that has taken place in the Probation Service over the years is well illustrated in the latest advert for Trainee Probation Officers.

It shows how the relationship, needs, and rehabilitation of the offender have almost slipped off the agenda. The main captions in large letters across the centre of the page state:

- PROTECT THE PUBLIC –
- REDUCE REOFFENDING –
- ASSIST VICTIMS OF CRIME –
- MANAGE RISK –
- ENFORCE SENTENCES –

This is very much about representing the State to the individual and says nothing about representing the individual to the State” (Buchanan, 2006).

Those tensions within the Service, around both its purpose as well as finding the 'right' central/local balance, are not new. I looked through some back copies of Napo's *Probation Journal* in preparing for this article and without picking on particularly special periods of probation history, found some revealing insights.

The December 1980 edition contained an article from three Napo members in Manchester, opposing change which they described “from being primarily of a social work nature to being primarily of a surveillance nature, involving the containment of high risk offenders. Along with this was to be a substantial reduction in officer autonomy, and a move towards management by autocratic direction, rather than by consultation” (Adams *et al*, 1980).

The June 1992 edition of the *Journal* contains a wonderful exchange between the then editor, Nigel Stone, and the departing head of the Home Office Probation Division, Philippa Drew. Stone writes: “The editorial board felt that an authoritative comment on the present climate and mood of the Service would be timely, reflecting on the siege mentality that seems widespread in the Service, the flagging morale at all grades, the emotional distance that seems to yawn between chiefs and their main grade staff (and junior managers), the increased pressure 'to deliver and to demonstrate' which can be extremely wearing yet no doubt affects staff at all levels, the uncertainties posed by cash limits, the tensions generated by the unsocial hours settlement”.

In her reply, Drew refers to Stone's letter as “an example of a curious trait which mars the excellence of the Probation Service; a combination of whinging and doom mongering” (Stone and Drew 1992).

Doom mongering?

With our present concern about the direction of NOMS and its implications for fragmenting and privatising probation provision, at a time when it is easy to think we are fighting the 'fight of all fights' to save the soul, future and values of the Probation Service, it is sobering to recognise that previous generations have had their own battles.

Without indulging in 'doom mongering', what conclusions would I reach?

My first conclusion relates to the need for an evidence base for all managerialist initiatives.

The experience of the Service to date in relation to targets, performance measures and structural reform, is that the centre has sometimes acted over-zealously in thinking it has found a formula which must be applied to all. It has then sought to

impose that policy, often in a counterproductive way.

A classic example was the decision to impose unrealistic targets on accredited programmes; targets that led to unsuitable people being placed on programmes; programmes not then having the desired impact on reoffending rates, and to the programmes subsequently falling from favour as a result.

The decision to dismantle and fragment the Probation Service in order to introduce contestability, despite overwhelming opposition, is another example of the government acting on the basis of ideology, rather than evidence of effectiveness. (See Napo's detailed response to the Home Office Consultation Paper on restructuring the Probation Service, *Restructuring Probation – What Works?* Napo 2005).

My second conclusion relates to staff. One of the many problems with the government's current approach to public services and public sector reform is its complete lack of recognition of the need for staff engagement and support for any change programme and the importance of staff feeling supported. The basic concept of 'employee care' is not just about being a good employer for its own sake, but about recognising that public services are dependant on staff for their success and that supporting and caring for staff is critical to securing effective performance.

Probation staff have suffered from many misguided and mismanaged attempts at managerialism over the years. Poor information technology and unwieldy and unrealistic targets are two obvious examples. NOMS just feels like the last straw.

I was recently at a NOMS meeting where I received yet another Power Point presentation with diagrams of NOMS and probation structures within it. I have lost track of how many presentations of different models I have sat through since Patrick Carter's report suggesting NOMS was first published in January 2004.

It is bad enough that civil servants are still scratching their heads trying to work out an organisational model for NOMS that might make sense, but even worse is the callous disregard for probation staff. At this same meeting, a chart popped up outlining the three critical factors for ensuring the success of Offender Management:

- Partnership and alliances
- Effective IT
- Contestability and Commissioning.

No mention was made of the importance of staff or of plans for workforce planning, training and development.

As Philip Whitehead and Roger Statham said in their 2005 book, *The History of Probation*: "We are witnessing an iterative bureaucratic process, based on short-term tactical decision making that satisfies the omnipotent political machine's aspiration to be seen to be in control of crime. It recognises little of the values or human interactions which drive the engagement of individuals, ultimately reflected in commitment and loyalty. Indeed for organisations to function effectively these factors require continuous attention and a culture of employee care is essential if people are to feel included. Organisational identity, clarity of purpose and task need to go hand in hand with good individual support, supervision and appraisal. Recent changes in moving probation from a national Probation Service to a National Offender Management Service structure seem to ignore these

essentials." (Whitehead and Statham 2005).

Looking forward

The Probation Service faces an uncertain future and managerialism looks set to take a new turn. The plan is to replace management by central targets, with a regional commissioning model. The theory is that Regional Offender Managers, (ROMs), will commission probation services from probation trusts or others, as they so decide. This commissioning model, with ROMs acting as agents of the Home Office and the Home Secretary, would mean potentially tighter, not looser, control from the centre. Time will tell whether this model will ever be fully realised.

Despite the threats that the Service currently faces, I have faith that its saving grace will continue to be in the staff that it recruits. Regardless of the wording of the advertisements, the Service continues to recruit people with a certain value base, as described by Julian Buchanan in his March 2006 *Probation Journal Blog*: "The NPS will need probation staff who can engage, understand, work alongside, address social inequalities, and help to equip and enable the offender to engage constructively in society".

Evidence to date suggests that these are the people who continue to be attracted to the Service as a career. Long may that be the case.

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References

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