

Prison works?

The government needs to make its mind up about prison, writes **Joe Black**: is it to be a modern industrialised gulag or a place to modify and control offending behaviour?

It is a commonly held view, one certainly held by the government, and most prison reformers, that the primary function of prison labour is to provide training and work experience to aid a prisoner in finding a post-release job. This is certainly not backed up by the everyday experiences of many prisoners and by the evidence base. Even the Prison Service reluctantly acknowledges that 'The aim of prison industries is to occupy prisoners in out-of-cell activity and wherever possible to help them gain skills, qualifications and work experience to improve their employment prospects upon release' (Select Committee on Home Affairs, 2004) (my emphasis).

The primary function of prison work is in fact the control of the prison population—give them something to do to keep them occupied and out of trouble. Even more bluntly, 'The desired outcomes from prison industries are: (i) to ensure dynamic security by providing purposeful activity at relatively low cost; and (ii) to support education, training, and employment (ETE) outcomes on release' (ibid). The order of priority is no accident.

Earned privileges and wages

The backbone of the system that ensures this 'dynamic security' is the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEP). The IEP was designed to ensure prisoners good behaviour and participation in purposeful activity, by offering as carrots a series of earnable privileges such as extra personal visits, time out of cell for association and even, nowadays, the right to smoke. In a wonderful piece

of sophistry, the Prison Service claim there are no sticks in the system—a prisoner who fails to behave correctly or maintain progress 'may be downgraded to the level below (as an administrative measure, not as a punishment imposed at adjudication)' (HM Prison Service, 2006) (my emphasis).

The IEP was first introduced in 1995 in response to the Woolf Report into events at Strangeways prison in 1990 and a whole host of other prison rebellions in the 1980s and early 1990s. Crudely put, the government wished to re-establish control within the prison system and put an end to the power of the 'old lags code' and to working class solidarity among prisoners. Competition for privileges and the limited number of jobs available in prisons were to be the tools of the system. As far as the present government is concerned, IEP has worked, according to Minister David Hanson 'This has been a valuable policy which has played an important part in securing order and control in prisons' (Hansard, 2008).

At the time of the Woolf Report, the prison population stood at 45,000. It has nearly doubled since then, more than 25,000 of that in the last ten years, largely without concomitant increases in the prison estate. As a result, the availability of prison jobs has significantly decreased. The fact that there are three separate UK Prison Services, all responsible to different sets of governmental organisations with different standards for the reporting of operational statistics, makes it difficult to draw an accurate picture of current job availability in the UK. We do know however that, of the

current prison population of over 83,000, approximately 13,300 are remand prisoners, and therefore unable to work. The best estimates available show that around 28,600 prisoners are in employment at any one time. Of these 16,800 are in administrative tasks such as cleaning, food production, and serving, and 11,800 are employed in workshops.

The workshops have a turnover of over £30 million at market prices, but the majority of products are consumed within the prison system itself. Forty per cent of these prisoners are employed on so-called 'Contract Services', producing goods for private sector companies. Many of these tasks are mundane, the equivalent of home piecework e.g. packing and sealing birthday cards in cellophane slips or assembling pendant light fittings, providing 'little training, qualifications or resettlement activities for prisoners' (HM Prison Service, undated). Some, though, do require higher skill levels and can provide much more on-the-job training including double glazing manufacture through to on-line marketing and website design.

The average weekly wage across the UK for a prisoner is £8.00, slightly less than the average British child receives a week in pocket money (Halifax, 2007). The minimum pay rate is £4.00, and for those willing to work but without a job or those classed as short-term sick, the rate is £2.50 a week. At the top end of the scale, a few prisoners in privately run prisons and those on day release from open prison may earn over £30. These basic pay rates are exactly the same as they were when the IEP scheme was introduced in 1995.

'Gis a job!'

Under IEP it can be argued that it is prison officers (POs) rather than the prisoners themselves that have benefited the most from its introduction. Home Office research commissioned in 1999 showed 'an increase in staff confidence and control' but 'reductions in favourable perceptions of staff fairness, relations with staff, regime fairness' (Liebling et al., 1999), both due to POs having greater discretionary powers under

IEP than before. This continues to be the case across the system and despite the introduction of job allocation systems across the prison service, one particular ongoing bone of contention is that jobs effectively remain in the gift of POs and, as such, they can be used as a basis for punishment and reward. The system is still seen to operate in an arbitrary and vindictive manner. Cross a PO and you could find yourself given the worst job available or with no job at all as an alternative to being up on a charge before the governor—or maybe you'll just find your pay at the end of the week is mysteriously 'short'.

For convicted prisoners, prison work is also not a thing of choice. You have no right to refuse work and if you do you will be punished. Initially it will be loss of privileges already earned, such as access to the canteen or extra visits then comes downgrading of IEP level or 50 per cent loss of earnings. Worse still are segregation and extra days on your sentence. Prisoners pursuing further education courses have even been refused access to educational materials as punishment, despite the Prison Service mantra in recent years of 'education, education, education'.

An exploitable resource

It is no coincidence that the introduction of IEP also coincided with the beginnings of the prison industrial complex in the UK. Prisoners were now seen as a valuable resource to be exploited through Contract Services. Previously, the poor quality of prison-produced goods meant that they were only fit for internal consumption but, with IEP, a system now existed to ensure that the 'workers' were forced to maintain higher quality standards. This also meant that this valuable resource could be exploited directly by the private sector. Contrary to Article 2.2c of the ILO Forced Labour Convention No. 29, ten per cent of all UK prisoners have been handed over to private prisons to be exploited as these multinationals see fit. In turn, these prisoners are sub-contracted out to secondary companies, who run evening and

weekend work sessions to help maximise their profits, all without the need for sick or holiday pay or employment laws.

Yet, despite the push to exploit the potential of the prison workforce, only a third of the prison population is engaged in work activities at any one time. This affects statistics for the average time spent out of cells and for purposeful activity of prisoners. The current average time outside cell during the core day is ten hours (11.5 hours in private prisons), down ten per cent since 1998. Prisoners in local prisons fare worst with no less than 30 per cent, and sometimes over 50 per cent, spending 20–22 hours a day in their cells.

Education and training vs. employment?

The lack of education, training and employment has been identified by the Home Office as the single greatest factor behind offending, exceeding all others, including housing, relationships, drug and alcohol abuse (Harper and Chitty, 2005), with prisoners released without a job being twice as likely to be reconvicted as those released with an ETE placement. Despite this evidence three-quarters of prisoners leave prison without a job or educational placement, due, in part, to the fact that a majority of employers refuse to recruit ex-prisoners.

While ETE provision continues to be woefully patchy and inconsistent, within the scheme workshop employment is promoted over education and training. For example, in 2007 in English Prison Service prisons, prisoners were still getting an average 50 pence less in wages a week for being on educational course than for employment in workshops where much of the work experience available does not relate to the outside job market because the focus is mainly on traditional skills. Unsurprisingly, some prisoners feel that they might as well still be sewing mailbags. Short-term prisoners are one of the most disadvantaged groups here. 'Two-thirds of prisoners are sentenced to prison for less than a year. Over half of these will be reconvicted within

two years. The fact that serving a short sentence is one of the most common reasons given for excluding inmates from programmes is a source of concern' (Webster et al., 2001).

Too many prisoners continue to suffer under the inequities of the present regime. It is time for the government to make its mind up about the prison service. Is it to be a modern industrialised gulag, paying third world wages, or is its role to be to modify and control offending behaviour? If it is the latter, then it can only continue to function as a sticking plaster over the ills of society at large, the same role IEP has played since 1995 within the prison service itself.

Joe Black works with the Campaign against Prison Slavery and is a long-term abolitionist and campaigner.

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