

PRISON VIOLENCE

The art of prison management is the art of managing effectively a potentially hostile and discontented population.

(Woolf Report, para 12.221)

Prisons are by definition coercive institutions. At their most fundamental they consist of one group of people, the staff, who deprive another group of people, the prisoners, of their liberty. Having recognised that fact, the question one might ask is not why there is so much violence in prison, but rather, why there is so little. It should certainly be no surprise that from time to time violence does erupt in the prison setting.

Violent incidents are not a new phenomenon in prisons. However, the years since 1986 have been ones of unparalleled violence in British prisons. In October 1987 television viewers around the world witnessed an officer being dragged across the roof of Peterhead Prison with a chain around his neck. No one will ever forget the trauma of Strangeways in April 1990. Fortunately the lessons learned from some of these incidents have been positive rather than negative.

In early 1988 the management of the Scottish prison service decided that the 60 most actively disruptive prisoners in the system, most of whom had been involved in the recent hostage incidents and riots, should be held in Peterhead Prison. This course of action was justified on the grounds that this would allow other long term prisons to return to relative normality.

Initially these prisoners were held in conditions which were very restricted. They were allowed out of their cells only one at a time and were not allowed to mix with each other. At least three members of staff were present when one prisoner was out of his cell. The environment was totally coercive.

The consequences of this kind of official response to violence was predictable.

Excessive security and control can have the opposite effects to the ones desired. (Woolf Report, para 940)

The prisoners, many of them young men in their early twenties with little expectation of release within any imaginable length of time, saw no reason to conform. Instead their behaviour became even more extreme. They responded with more violence. Staff resorted to wearing riot helmets and protective clothing as a matter of course. Prisoners took a perverse pride in showing that, although staff might have power over every last detail of their daily lives, they could not gain control over who

the prisoners were as persons.

The prisoner's perspective of this experience has been graphically depicted by a man who was in Peterhead at the time:

... I have heard the wails of madness - men mutilating themselves: men being literally dragged away to Carstairs: men setting themselves and their cells on fire: men in solitary attacking half-a-dozen riot-clad warders with glass and sharpened toothbrushes. (1)

In due course both staff and prisoners recognised that this state of affairs could not continue indefinitely. It is not possible, either in principle or in practice, to hold prisoners in conditions such as this for any length of time. An alternative, more positive manner of living together had to be found.



There has never been any argument, at least in theory, that the key to the smooth running of any prison is the relationship between the prisoner and the prison officer. Since at least the mid 1960s the most frequent expression of this concept has been through some form of group officer scheme which has involved one or more officers being given responsibility for an identified group of prisoners.

There has been increasing appreciation that there are particular benefits to be gained from developing this kind of arrangement for prisoners who pose special problems for management. This has often been done by setting up small units in which a more positive form of regime can be developed and in which there is qualitative involvement between staff and prisoners.

The challenge facing Peterhead at that juncture was to develop such a model within an existing culture. This was a high risk strategy in an environment where trust was interpreted as softness, where respect was seen as an expression of weakness. There was always a sense of unease, even of fear about what the next day might

bring, both on the part of staff and of the prisoners. But gradually staff and prisoners came to recognise that a way of living decently together had to be found. It was accepted that this could not come about through an expression of power and of coercion.

This was the background to the little publicised 1989 Peterhead Conference, attended by the brass of the prison system from the Director down, researchers and academics and eleven staff, including basic grade, from the prison itself. There were also eight of us - hostage-takers, rioters and all-round bad guys. At the end of the conference everyone agreed that change was necessary, and although I'm sure some were only paying lip-service, we prisoners left feeling a great deal of optimism, believing that change was inevitable. (1)

The strong message which came from prisoners at that conference was that much greater attention should be paid to preventive strategies rather than to reactive ones. Simply, if all people, prisoners and staff, in main stream prisons were treated justly and given the opportunity to act in a responsible manner, major incidents would be less likely to happen.

Woolf expressed this sentiment in the following words:

The best way of reducing the risk of disruption and disturbance is to improve the regime within a prison and to improve the way prisoners are handled within the prison system. (12.231)

One prisoner who was present at the Peterhead conference said the same thing more directly:

The prison system must start treating its 'customers' with respect (a term even liberals cringe at in relation to criminals), humanity and dignity. Don't pay lip-service to it. Train your basic grade officer to a professional standard, because on the landing or the corridor he is the man-manager. Give prisoners real opportunity and responsibility, not just the opportunity of earning a pittance while being immorally used and exploited. Give men the opportunity and responsibility of determining their own 15 years behind bars. Give men the opportunity of keeping their families intact, emotionally and financially. (1)

This is the strong agenda which has to be delivered if we are to have any hope of ensuring that violence in prison is kept to an absolute minimum.

Reference

1. McGrath J (1991), Time For Things to Change, Scottish Child, Edinburgh.

Andrew Coyle is Governor of HM Prison, Brixton.