

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**We are starting a CJM letters page: letters on topics and articles in CJM are welcome, though inclusion in entirety cannot be guaranteed. We look forward to hearing from you.**

Dear CJM,

**Death For Probation?**

I write to say to my old friend and acquaintance, Bill McWilliams (CJM 9), that his notice of our demise is greatly exaggerated. Not only will the ideal of Probation live on, so will Probation.

As with most Chief Probation Officers, currently beset with so much innovation in both the criminal and civil aspects of our work, I cannot undertake any studied response to Bill's article. However, I want to say that Chief Probation Officers certainly endeavoured to get upstream of the 'Punishment in the Community' debate through their earlier paper entitled 'More Demanding than Prison'. This was a much misunderstood paper. The crux of it was to establish exacting non-custodial penalties firmly within the remit of the Crown Courts by identifying community sanctions which only Crown Courts would be able to use. Had that been achieved, then the whole structure of punitive sentencing might have been ameliorated.

That is water under the bridge. Our task now is not just about the 'management' of offenders, but how the Service arranges for those who have offended to manage themselves and the damaging impulses which many of them are prey to. This is the basis of current approaches to those committing sexual offences - in particular, incest offences - as well as those whose behaviour is repetitive in whatever serious or dangerous way.

However Probation Officers may view themselves, there is no doubt in my mind that offenders have always experienced the Probation Order and the stigma attaching to it as punishment. What we may now be doing with the Order is rescuing it from ambiguity so that it can be seen as the demanding and constructive intervention it was always intended to be.

That does not mean that the Service - Practitioners or Managers - has to ignore the social aspects of offending and the serious deprivations that many who offend experience in their lives.

Much current work of the Association of Chief Officers of Probation, as well as Chief Probation Officers and practitioners individually, still involves campaigning on behalf of those who are discriminated against by current economic and fiscal policy. The research undertaken by Lancaster University for

the Association of Chief Officers on poverty and in relation to offenders themselves as victims of crime are key examples.

Having said all that, I do like Bill McWilliams' proposal that the Probation Service should encourage and resource offender and prisoner self-help groups. We need to release the energies of that deprived, distressed and marginal person that Robert Harris is quoted as speaking about. Such people put us in touch with a real, as opposed to sentimental, compassion.

Yours sincerely,  
*Gordon Read, Chief Probation Officer  
Devon Probation Service*

Dear CJM,

**Penal Justice - A Shipwreck?  
Refer to Chapter 14 'Les Miserables'  
by Victor Hugo**

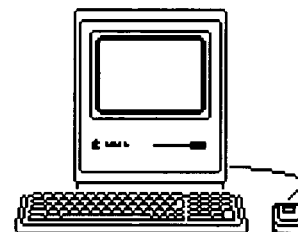
In his annual address at the Prison Governors' Conference on 3 November 1992 in Blackpool the Home Secretary declared that he did not believe that there was an ideological justification for keeping prisons as a public sector monopoly. He went on to state that more providers could give more choice, more innovation, a better deal for prisoners: all achievable and at the same time as giving more value for money.

I would ask value for whom? Obviously, the shareholders of the privately run prisons, but what part does security play in this Utopia and why have we thrown the ideals of our (Prison Service) Mission Statement out of the window?

Why have so many involved in the criminal justice process, remained passive and unmoved by the ethical and social dangers inherent in the founding of private commercial warehouses for prisoners? Is it apathy? Or is it opportunism which has stifled any concerted reaction?

Consider the following points:

1. Imprisonment is a punishment consisting of the deprivation of liberty, which can only be imposed by the legitimate authority of the State.
2. In passing this right over to profit making concerns, the Government is thereby licensing "private punishment



places" giving private commercial companies coercive powers over citizens who have contravened the law.

3. Firms running such places are only doing so for PROFIT. Every unfilled prison bed is a loss to the shareholders. What price rehabilitation, in the cut and thrust of profiting only by filled prison cells?

4. Inmates are not items or commodities to be abandoned by the courts. Some will seek redress through the European Courts. Some seek redress by challenging the control system.

5. Manchester Prison has been selected as the first establishment. If privatised, it would be the largest, on site, prison in the hands of a private profit making company not only in Europe, not only in USA, but in the world. Has the practicality of this been examined and why have we shelved the achievable recommendations of Lord Justice Woolf?

The first privatised prison would be holding among its population 20 high security Cat A men, "E" List men, vulnerable prisoners all under the supervision of a company unpractised in the skills such containment requires.

6. There may well be 'no votes in prisons' but to parcel up, for private shareholders, the citizen's deprivation of liberty, is a dangerous step which removes layers of accountability and reduces convicted inmates to profit making items.

7. The Market Testing Exercise currently being undertaken on the instructions of the Government lacks an important element which can invalidate it - it has not been, and will not be subjected to a feasibility study, therefore its specifications are based on speculation.

8. Of even more concern, the many



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voluntary sector organisations which have long been part of the prison regime, may not be able to be involved in privately run prisons. Many community groups have constitutions debarring them from working with profit-making organisations.

9. A two tier prison system or as the Home Secretary termed it a 'dual strategy' means that pressure will then be put on other establishments to make staff cuts. We are then into the economic competition of warehousing prisoners as our first concern, with stability, security and constructive relationships between staff and inmates as a post-script to the profit curve. Where is the vocational aspect of our role then?

For all those of you who read, shrug, and pass on to the next item, I would remind you of the words of Dante - 'The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis maintain their neutrality'.

Yours sincerely,  
*Katie Dawson*  
*HM Prison Service*

Dear CJM,  
**Dyslexia and Delinquency?**

Recently I met with representatives of some agencies to discuss issues concerning dyslexia and the criminal justice services.

Although dyslexia cannot be a cause, justification or defence of offending, there are many aspects of dyslexic behaviour that are relevant to those working with offenders. There is considerable awareness of dyslexia - two recent TV programmes have highlighted the dyslexia/delinquency connection and most of this has focused on the literacy problems experienced by many dyslexics in spite of normal intelligence and opportunity to learn. The necessity for appropriate teaching to prevent or overcome the frustrations of failure and loss of self esteem has a high educational priority which the British Dyslexia Association is targeting during the European Year of Early Recognition in 1993.

However, in addition to the well known difficulties of reading, writing and spelling, I feel that other dyslexic difficulties have greater relevance for the criminal justice agencies. Current research demonstrates that dyslexic

difficulties arise from neurological differences in the brains so that some kinds of information are processed differently, and perhaps less efficiently. This may result in specific deficits in visual or auditory perception, sequential short term memory skills, motor coordination skills, directional confusion, concentration problems and difficulties in speech and oral expression. Fortunately few dyslexics have problems in all these areas! Identification, and their practical implications, need to be included in training programmes for agencies concerned with offenders. The development of counselling to meet the social needs, teaching to meet the educational needs and employment and training advice to meet the practical needs of the dyslexic offender would be an effective use of resources, especially if these services were implemented for young people early in their delinquent career. The new Specified Activities programmes, within the Criminal Justice Act may offer a useful opportunity.

Work in Europe and the USA has indicated that there is a substantial

dyslexic element in the delinquent population. Very little work has been done in this country but I would like to hear from individuals or agencies who are interested in this subject.

Yours sincerely,  
*J Matty*  
*Chairman*  
*British Dyslexia Association*

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