

Imprisonment in the 21st Century

Sir David Ramsbotham sets out his hopes for the prison system of the future.

Having only joined the Criminal Justice System some four years ago, I feel something of an imposter, writing about imprisonment in a Journal such as this. But prospects for the treatment and conditions of prisoners are already so different from what they were only four years ago, that I feel in a position to at least comment on them from my privileged viewpoint as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. Had independent inspection not been restored in 1981, after an absence of 104 years, then, on the basis of its value, that would have been top of my AD 2000 wish list. I say this because one of the most welcome prospects for the Millennium is more joint inspection of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), towards which the present Inspectorates are already directing much attention.

My prospective wish list stems from two immediately past dates, ignoring 1962, and the abolition of the Prison Commission, leading to the Prison Department of the Home Office and now the Prison Service Agency. I hope that the Agency will develop as an operational service, managed accordingly, but that is a subject for another article. Prisons need firm direction and leadership, in addition to budgetary control, if the treatment and conditions of prisoners are to receive their due attention.

The Woolf Report

The first is 1990, and the publication of Lord Woolf's seminal report into the riots at Manchester and elsewhere,

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followed by the White Paper 'Custody Care and Justice'. At last the agendas in these two important documents are being implemented, including the offending behaviour programmes that I see as a growth industry as their value becomes better understood.

But the prospect that I look forward to most keenly is the introduction of what Lord Woolf called 'community clusters' of prisons. This implies that prisons in each part of the country should have the capacity to hold all types of prisoner from that area, allowing and encouraging communities to become more involved with the treatment and conditions of prisoners from that community, and their families, particularly as they are prepared for release. I believe that this would save money, not least on visits, and simplify sentence management.

Secondly, from 1 May 1997, the CJS has been made to think and work together as a system, and not a loose confederation of member states, each with their own qualifications about working with any other. No part of the system stands to gain more from this than imprisonment. I have always likened the role of imprisonment within the CJS to that of hospitals in the NHS. They are the acute part, where treatment takes place. Like hospitals they have no control over who comes in, but must try to make them better. Treatment is a multi-disciplinary affair, based on the assessed needs of the individual. It will not be completed in either prison or hospital, but must be continued in the community in the form of aftercare. The fuel of the process is information. The hospital or prison needs to know everything about an individual, so that appropriate treatment can be planned and prioritised. In the case of prisons this means information from Courts, Police, Probation, Social Services, Health and Education, to name but six. Similarly, at the end of sentence, details of what treatment has been successful, what is still not complete or what has failed or not yet been tried needs to be passed on to whoever in the community is responsible for aftercare. In other words I am looking forward to the prospect of 'seamless' sentences, in which each element of the CJS plays its appropriate part.

But in what types of prison? I would like to see the roles of the Local prisons formalised into looking after the needs of short term prisoners - those yet to be convicted or sentenced, those

receiving sentences of less than six months, and the resettlement of those in their last six months of sentence. Training prisons should cater for those with sentences of more than six months, with categorisation according to risk being balanced by role specialisation, so that certain prisons concentrate on particular programmes. I see the need for differentiation between young adults, between 18 and 25, and those over the age of 25. Women's prisons are to be separately directed in future. The juvenile estate will include all those under the age of 18 in CJS custody.

Meeting prisoners' needs

I would like to see formal adoption of the concept of the 'Healthy Prison', published recently in our thematic review 'Suicide is Everyone's Concern'. By this I mean prisons in which the weakest prisoners feel safe, all are treated with respect as fellow human beings, all are encouraged to improve themselves and given the opportunity to do so, and all are enabled to maintain contact with their families and prepare for release.

Needs assessments of prisons will prove what resources they require to enable them to carry out their given roles, and also the true cost of imprisonment. I would like to see certain aspects of the treatment and conditions of prisoners ring fenced, including compulsory needs assessments on which all sentence planning should be based - education, work skills, social skills, health and substance abuse.

Therefore my views on prospects are inextricably linked to my hopes for the future of the Prison Service within the CJS. As always the key to success lies with its people, and I have been fascinated by the motivation that working with prisoners engenders. Accompanied by their increased status and standing in the eyes of the public, as their role on its behalf is better understood, and given the stability that I suggest that my hopes may provide, I have no doubt that the Service will deliver better treatment and conditions for prisoners in 2000 and beyond. Let us hope that its challenges do not include the overcrowding and restricted resources that have so bedevilled it during the last years of this Millennium.

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