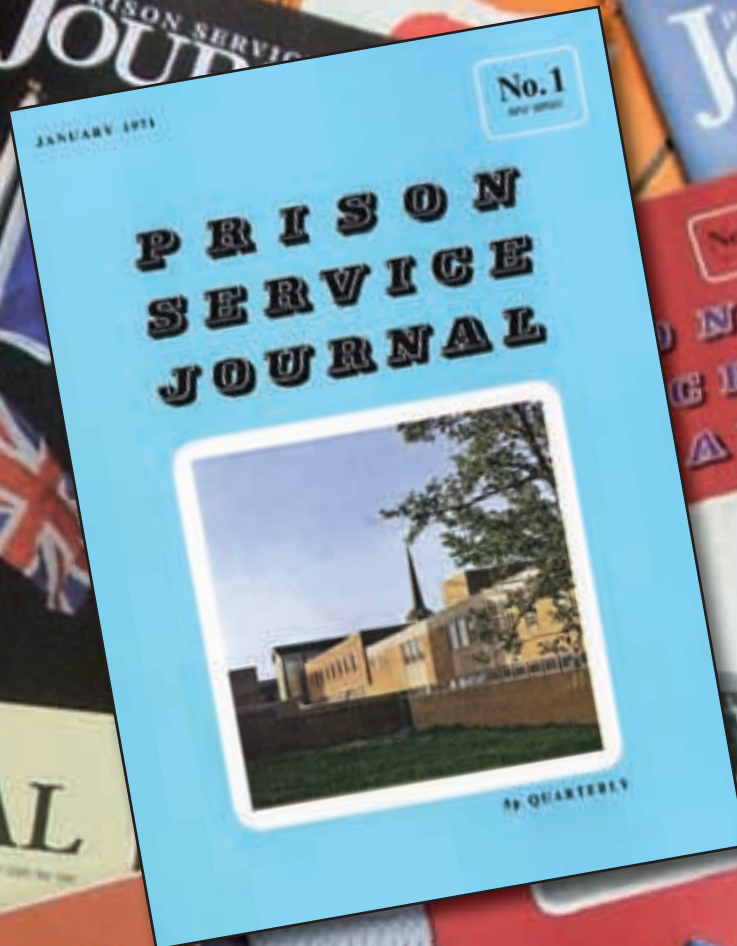


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Making of Assistant Governors

At the time of writing, Frank Ainsworth had worked with offenders in the community and in prisons. He left to take up a post as lecturer in Applied Social Studies at Dundee University.

THE role of the assistant governor in the Prison Service and the appropriate training for someone appointed to this position is a subject which has been discussed on many occasions. I make no apology for returning to this subject for there still appears to be much confusion and need for clarification about these two areas. Experience of training for probation officers and residential child care staff now seems increasingly relevant yet the Prison Service remains largely unaffected by the lessons learnt in these situations. To utilise this experience would require major reorganisation of our training programme but this is exactly what I suggest needs doing if professional development both at an individual level and as a Service is to occur.

Anyone expressing interest in becoming an assistant governor receives the following job description from the recruiting body: 'An assistant governor is responsible for the oversight of a group of men or boys during the period of their sentence. There are two main aspects of this work. He is concerned with each individual member of the group, with assessing the cause of his delinquency and with his needs in terms of training, and of personal advice and counsel. He is also concerned with the group life of the house or wing where they live An assistant governor will also have responsibilities for the supervision and training of staff. His precise duties will vary with the approach to training of the particular establishment in which he is serving'.

This job description clearly gives the assistant governor three areas of responsibility: to the individual, to the group and to the total community. To be competent in these areas demands a knowledge of general theories relating to human growth and development (the individual), group dynamics and role theory (the group) and the sociology of institutions (the community). It is exactly the same area as needed by residential child care staff and which are being developed in the syllabuses of courses designed to train staff for work in all areas of residential care.

Normal and abnormal development

A specific knowledge of delinquency or prisons is in many respects the least necessary initial knowledge for this will arise from experience gained in the practical day to day situation. A knowledge of delinquency or faulty personality development will also arise from the study of normal rather than abnormal development and should be related to our general theoretical framework rather than be regarded as a special subject. For I would suggest that our primary task is to run residential institutions for the care of delinquents who

need secure conditions. Our focus must be on normality not on pathological development. For to concentrate on areas of faulty development can only be sterile and produce a feeling of frustration and hopelessness which is already too familiar in the Prison Service.

Nor should we assume that our situation is unique which is what we do if we place too much emphasis on our clients' delinquency. Institutions for social deviants are common enough and all must embody the essential components of residential care, namely care, comfort and control. The fact that in our instance control is emphasised merely highlights an order of priorities, but an institution which fails to care and to comfort as well as to control can only reinforce and not alleviate delinquency. For it is the experience of these three components, correctly ordered, which provides the basis for further emotional development so essential to the individual in his struggle towards a non-delinquent image.

Such a view of the penal institution may be radical in so far that it shifts the emphasis of our thinking away from the areas in which our clients are different from ourselves to the areas in which they are the same. It allows us to see our clients not as delinquents but as people firstly and delinquents secondly. Our approach in training can then be towards developing our clients' good parts rather than on concentrating on his bad parts. To reinforce our clients' good feelings about themselves seems, in many instances, to be our best hope of rehabilitation. This must be particularly true of adolescents where our aim must always be to prevent further reinforcement of the delinquent image which once it is confirmed will be very difficult to change. It also allows opportunities for those in our care to seek new roles for themselves other than that of 'delinquent'. In many respects our concentration on our clients' delinquency must be a defence against anxiety and having to admit that our clients are just like us.

The present training of assistant governors must, as a result of this view be questioned, for it seems to concentrate very much on 'delinquency' and 'prison' rather than on providing the general theoretical background which I have outlined. It falls into many errors and reinforces defences. A redesigned course ought to begin by regarding the entire two-year probationary period as training. The initial period would be in the central training organisation, being a theoretical course in the subject of human growth and development, role theory and group dynamics and the sociology of institutions. This period would be shorter than the present staff course and would be followed by postings to selected institutions. At institutional level, newly recruited assistant governors would not immediately be immersed in managerial duties but would be appointed to the role of

'acting' assistant governor. Practices of this kind are already well established in the field of probation and child care. To immerse newly recruited assistant governors, many of whom may never have had any institutional experience, immediately in the responsibility of running a borstal house or wing of a prison as happens at present can only create enormous anxiety and impede learning which must necessarily be accomplished at this time if professional development is to occur.

Acting assistant governors would be allotted to a student role in the receiving institutions and be given limited duties such as those given to student caseworkers in fieldwork training situations. This would involve supervision of a small group of trainees for whom they would be responsible during the period of their sentence and who they would see very frequently on a casework basis. Given careful selection of suitable cases this would allow the acting assistant governor to learn about the type of individuals he has to deal with in considerable depth as well as about the institution and the practical problems of management of individual training programmes. Whilst occupying such a role the acting assistant governor would not have administrative responsibilities other than in relation to those cases he was working with nor would he be a member of the senior management group or be responsible for staff supervision or training.

Allied to such a development would be the need for professional supervision at institution level and each institution to which acting assistant governors were posted would need facilities and an appropriate experienced and qualified member of staff allocated to the role of supervisor. The objective of this supervision would be to support the acting assistant governor whilst he is learning about his clients and the institution, to facilitate learning and to keep his anxiety at a manageable level so that this does not interfere with learning. Only by organising ourselves in this way are we likely to improve the integration between theory and practice which in so many situations in the Service appear to be completely divorced.

As acting assistant governors would not, in this plan, have institutional responsibilities it would be possible to recall them to the central training organisation for further periods of training during the remaining probationary period. No longer would this be difficult because the assistant governor was too immersed in his institution to be spared. Indeed his role specifically is designed to allow this to take place. Nor would it be necessary to cram into the initial

training period all the knowledge for someone becoming an assistant governor. Some knowledge more appropriate to a latter stage in an assistant governor's career could be left for these recall periods, when it would be of more meaningful and direct value. Here I think criminology, penology, management studies and staff and student supervision could best be introduced, some of them probably in the final recall session as the probationary period was concluding and the acting assistant governor was about to assume responsibility for a unit of an institution.

Caseworkers or managers

This type of scheme demands that we train all newly joined assistant governors as caseworkers firstly and managers secondly and no doubt the plea will be made that this is not necessary for all our institutions and is only really

applicable to borstals. Such a view does not seem tenable for to manage an effective institution demands understanding of individual behaviour in the context of the group and the community which can best be acquired by casework training. Management training can then be built on a very firm foundation and it is the depth and quality of these studies which will need to be varied according to the size and type of institution in which we work.

To implement a model of this kind demands resources in terms of teaching staff for the central organisation, supervisors for the field and recruits to train. It would probably mean using a limited number of institutions as training

units and posting people away from them following the end of the probationary period. A claim will be made that at present we cannot afford to do all of these things but I suspect that a redistribution of existing resources would go a long way to covering the demands that a scheme of this kind would make.

As I watch the recruitment of assistant governors and see how many of them fail to become effective leaders of institution staff because of inadequate training rather than because of personal defects, I ask if we can continue to abuse our scarce resources any longer. Instead of helping to develop the Service many assistant governors simply become encapsulated in a role which fails to provide them with any satisfaction or have any impact on either the staff or inmates they are supposed to support and train. The ethos of the institution in which they serve remains unaltered and this must reflect the inadequacy of our present training methods.

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