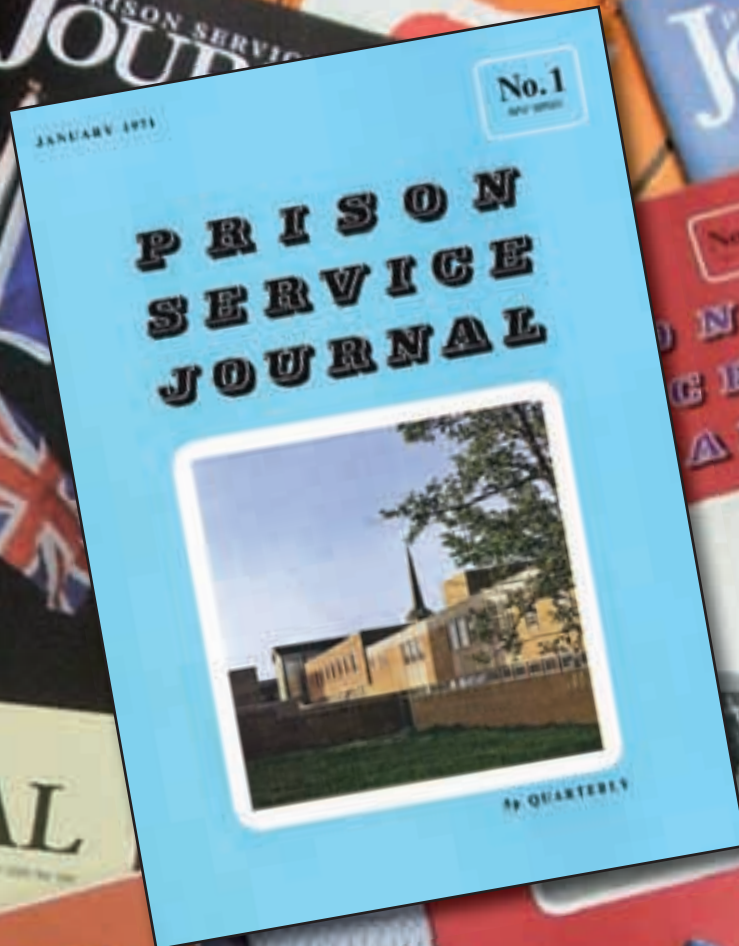


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The Media and the Message

At the time of writing, **Alan Rayfield** was an assistant governor. He went on to be Governor of HMP Long Lartin.

Seasonal pressures

THE late summer months are usually described as the 'silly' season by exasperated news editors faced with a nation on holiday and determined to ignore the world. It is in August that the Loch Ness monster takes up its traditional place in the sporting calendar and newspaper headlines compete to report her (?) non activities. Failing this, the weather and holidays are a good standby. 'Phew, it's warm!' ('Ugh, it's cold!') says the popular Press, or 'Traffic Nightmare on Bypass'.

This may have been the case in previous years but this year Ulster and the Middle East situation have taken care of the headlines whilst, in our own sphere, the Parkhurst trial and its aftermath provided a rich feast for the newspaper and magazine world. Strangely enough, the television companies did not seize this opportunity even though 'Panorama' was still alive and well amid a welter of repeats.

T.V. coverage disappointing

The main B.B.C. TV contribution this summer has been the 'Man Alive' team's reporting to the nation on its borstal system. This programme summed up all the strengths and weaknesses of television as a communication medium. On the one hand it was able to present a wealth of material in a very short time but on the other hand it showed it in such a subjective way that I found myself mentally shouting: 'Yes, but ...' at the box for much of the time. For this viewer it demonstrated the danger of accepting what one sees and hears on television as the factual truth and left me feeling uneasy about all these other truth-revealing crusades that regularly appear on all channels.

Tale of two borstals

Briefly, the programme contrasted the workings of Portland and Hatfield borstals and discussed whether borstal training can cope with today's needs. Whatever may have been the original intention Portland was shown as an oppressive, doom-laden place, forever shrouded in mist against a visual backcloth that would have done credit to a Hammer Films production. One shot showed James Astor interviewing some boys digging a trench with the foghorn booming out at

regular intervals. The only missing ingredients were the baying of hounds and the clank of chains. Hatfield was seen as a *cleaner* place with a relaxed regime. It was interesting to note that the Portland boys were shown in their working clothes whilst the Hatfield boys wore their evening clothes and generally seemed to be more civilised. However, the attitudes of both sets of boys were basically similar and both complained of being treated like children. The boys' subjective criticism was not balanced by objective reporting even though some staff were given a lot of screen time. Skilful editing of film and leading questions by the interviewer created a subtle feeling of disquiet after staff had spoken. At no time did one feel that society had any responsibility for the way our borstal system operates.

After this experience one faced the second programme with some pessimism. It opened with a filmed report of the discharge of one Hatfield boy and his contact with his after-care officer and erstwhile family. The usual pious 'What can we do?' type of question was put to the after-care officer but he gave some very uncompromising replies which was cheering. The programme then became a live discussion in the Hatfield Chapel between an ex-tutor organiser, Geoffrey Parkinson, wearing his crusading, anti-institution probation officer hat, Desmond Wilcox, the producer, and James Astor versus (or so it seemed) Tom Hayes on the platform with the governors and deputy governors of the two institutions plus Frank Foster sitting in the body of the hall. The whole tableau made one think of a Christians and lions production with Desmond Wilcox as Caesar and the Hatfield Boys as the dutiful plebeians.

As is usual on these occasions the discussion was bitty and disjointed but the high spots were Tom Carnegie's refusal to become lion fodder and the obvious discomfiture of Desmond Wilcox when the Hatfield boys loudly supported their governor over his reply to the compulsory church attendance chestnut. On balance the programme was not too bad but it suffered from the usual 'Man Alive' complaint in that a great deal of emotion was spent over the plight of the supposed underdog against their oppressors coupled with a steadfast refusal to admit that society is responsible for the actions of its agents. If the programme sought to inform then it did not: if it sought to reform then its targets were the wrong ones.

Tough or tender

On 24th August, the 'Late Night Line-up' team created a discussion group to look at T. Murton and J. Hyams' book about the Arkansas prison farms scandal. The group consisted of Douglas Gibson, C.H. Rolph and Ian Scarlett but they soon left the subject of the book to look at the English prison system. All three of them made very sympathetic noises with C.H. Rolph saying that 'We don't deserve the Prison Service we have', Ian Scarlett attacking the implementation of the Mountbatten Report and how it stopped prison officers seeing themselves as social workers and Douglas Gibson remarking that the public has a need to punish its offenders and has an emotional investment in keeping prisoners down and in. He also commented that prison staff get bad publicity regardless of what they do and will always be criticised by one section of the community as being too harsh and by another as being too soft. The discussion was low keyed, reasonable and helpful but it was noticeable that they made a distinction between prison and borstal staff, who were praised for doing so well in spite of their difficulties and the Prison Department of the Home Office who were given very poor publicity. It would seem that the price of promotion is infamy.

'New Society' looks at Parkhurst

New Society for 18th June has an interesting article by Stuart Hall called 'A World at One With Itself' in which he examines the concepts that underlie news presentation on radio. He looks at the way in which the Great British Public is treated by those that know best and asks: 'Do the media help us to understand the significant real events in the real world?' The instant judgemental style of many of the news programmes is called into doubt and Hall criticises the media for reporting 'violent' events like Ulster or Stop-the-Seventies-Tour without going into the background detail which makes these events understandable. At the moment they are presented as a 'meaningless explosion of meaningless and violent acts' in a style which can only be compared to a *Daily Express* front page. The B.B.C. will say that these events are covered in depth at the weekend by their foreign or local correspondents, but as Hall says, this is like telling a *Daily Sketch* reader to take *The Times* should he wish to be better informed. In view of this, what hope has the prison officer of losing his 'warder' label?

The issue for 4th June gave us a piece by Michael De-la-Noy about a transvestite homosexual written in a style which owes a lot to Tony Parker and the edition for

11th June has an article by Moses Laufer which examines the problem of severe mental stress amongst adolescents. He pleads for earlier recognition of stress amongst youngsters since if their symptoms are ignored when they first appear it will be much harder to help them later on.

An important article

The irrepressible Geoffrey Parkinson appeared twice in July: on the 2nd July when he mentioned the existence of Recidivists Anonymous at Pentonville and on the 30th July where he pointed out the obvious implications of the N.A.C.R.O. report concerning the visits of prisoners' families. However, an important article by Professor T.C.N. Gibbens appeared in the edition of 3rd September in which he asked: 'How should we treat violent offenders?' Having made the point that we are all potentially violent, Gibbens partly answered his own question by saying that we must consider violent situations not people. For example a potentially violent man may present no problem until he is drunk or in love (the juxtaposition is unintentional). Evidence shows that it is a myth to think that there is a small group of individuals who are responsible for the great majority of serious aggressive offences although it is difficult to convince the general public of this. It is sometimes difficult to convince prison staff of this as well and one wonders how often we fail to see a potentially violent situation arising because we need the explosion to take place just as much as the inmates do. In these cases can we be sure that we, and the other prisoners, do not subconsciously fix certain inmates with a label marked 'violent' and expect them to act out their violence for the therapeutic good of the rest of the prison? Gibbens gives credit to the prison and medical authorities for their treatment of violent offenders and concedes that this is not appreciated by the public. But we are only just beginning to understand the real nature of the problem. Read the article.

Depressing

For me, and I suppose for most members of the Service, the most depressing item of news during the summer was the Parkhurst trial and its aftermath. Its day to day proceedings were covered in detail by radio, television and the Press and its implications were discussed in magazines and newspapers long after the judge had passed his sentences. The best analysis of the background to this riot was by the 'Insight' team in the *Sunday Times* for 2nd August, although James Morton's article 'Parkhurst and After' in *New Society* on 6th August was also very good. Both articles looked at the details leading up to the disturbances and traced

the source of the trouble to the implementation of the 1966 Mountbatten Report and the subsequent growth of the siege mentality at the Home Office. The failure of the administrative headquarters to understand the reality of the operational situation makes almost classic reading and one hopes that its implications will not be lost to the training field. However, throughout all the Press comments runs the implication that it is the administrators who failed whilst the men on the spot did their best in a hopeless situation. Of course it is not that simple and the question 'What should the Home Office do with its violent offenders?' remains unanswered especially when one appreciates that at least three of the riot ring leaders should have been in a mental hospital. Professor Gibbens' article takes on a new urgency in the light of the Parkhurst affair.

But when all the talking and writing was done there came another question. For years conditions in our prisons have been known and deplored yet society

does not feel that the urgent necessary actions should be taken to cope with these problems. To blame the Home Office rather than the prison staff is just as pointless because it is clear that the Home Office can do little without money and resources. The real question is: 'Does society want its Prison Service to succeed in its given task?' and the answer seems to be that it does not. The sociological and psychological reasons for this are deep and well hidden but surely Douglas Gibson has a point when he talks of the public's need to punish. However, not only must criminals be punished but so must those who deal with them since these are the agents of the punishment. When these agents refuse to accept their role it forces society to examine the darker side of its nature. If the Parkhurst riot can help us move towards a healthier and saner society then all the suffering and squalor will not have been in vain. I wonder if this point was made after the Dartmoor riot of 1932?



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