

Comment

Walking the High Wire

In his address to the National Briefing Conferences in December, the Director-General, Richard Tilt called for a balance to be struck in achieving the Service's principle tasks of ensuring prisoners serve the sentence of the court, improving relationships between staff and prisoners and providing opportunities for prisoners to take part in programmes focusing upon their offending and offering hope for change.

His comments are timely coming as they do after the damaging failures in security which led to the Woodcock and Learmont Reports. It is essential that the Service gets it right on security but that is not enough nor should getting it right mean that a zealous application of searching, for example, becomes punitive in practice and lacks justifiable security reasons. It has happened before namely when Control and Restraint techniques were first introduced the new skill did not merely supplement but took over from the traditional officer skills of persuasion and reasoning with prisoners.

To tumble off balance into total security and control would be to forget the lessons of Strangeways and devalue the considerable work that has been done to acknowledge the need for Justice to enter the prison gates and inform our work. Indeed that would be poor security because intelligence gathered through our links with prisoners is often what most effectively foils an escape plot. Links with prisoners are forged out of our daily contact with them carried out in the spirit of our duty of care. At that same briefing Conference to which Richard Tilt spoke, the Operational Director for the North, Alastair Papps reiterated a long-standing ethic which underpins our work that people are sent to prison as punishment not for punishment. Punishment alone will not work and if prison is to work then it needs to offer not merely the short term gain of preventing the individual offender committing offences outside prison during imprisonment but to enhance the chances of avoiding offending on release. Protecting the public means both incarceration and rehabilitation.

It is helpful to have our basic philosophy re-stated because holding onto it is going to be hard in the face of the pressures now upon the Service.

Along with other public services financial constraints are severe. The capital programme is being halved and running costs will need to be drastically reduced by around five per cent each year for the next three years.

Against that sombre background the prison population is rising to new levels, consistently over 50,000. Such a rise is likely to continue as the Government press the police to give higher priority to catching criminals than to crime prevention and the courts to handing out lengthier sentences than to the principle of judging each case on its merits.

If that were not enough the Senior Management Review of the Home Office which recently turned its attention to the Prison Service Agency severely criticised the attitude of the Service to the reasonable concerns of Ministers and the public. It asserted that responses were slow and unheeding of these two significant stake holders in our work. Little was said of the other stake holders such as prisoners, their families, staff, the Judiciary nor other agencies within the Criminal Justice System who make demands upon us and whom we serve. More balance in this aspect of the Review would have strengthened its authority.

In the face of these tribulations the loss in October last year of Derek Lewis as Director General seemed a deeply damaging blow to the Service. Few in that post have given so much of themselves to the Service and shown such an eye for the concerns of the officer on the landing. His achievement in raising the profile of the Director-General in the media was second to none and he visited more prisons and spoke with more staff than many a previous holder of the post. Unfortunately he will be associated by some staff with the introduction of market testing and, ironically in the light of his ending, seen as too willing to respond to Ministers, however, the manner of his going did not do justice to the considerable contribution he made to the Service.

Tribulations can be salutary and from disaster can come renewal. For the first time the Service has a Director General who is of the Service and not plucked from the wider Home Office or further afield. That should give us confidence knowing that he can speak to us and for us from a background of sound knowledge and experience. He is one of the Prison Service family and that should mean we can speak frankly and openly and already in the Briefing Conferences he has shown a willingness to listen. There is an atmosphere of goodwill and a real wish to see him do well. That way the Service will do well, too ■