

away from the story of the Thames hulks of the 18th and 19th centuries. There might be something in that. And we have 'RTU' units — wooden prisons which arrive in bits on the back of lorries. McDonalds build new 'drive-through' units in much the same way. Perhaps the first McJail is not far away.

With the recent publication of Patrick Carter's report into the future of private and state prisons, this book has come at a time when change may be imminent. To use the American term, Carter recommends the creation of 'supermax'

prisons to accommodate as many as two or three-thousand prisoners in one institution, close to major conurbations. One academic recently described the supermax as a 'solution in search of a problem', and talk of bringing such an institution to the UK is unwelcome.

The British public love talk about crime, punishment and prisons, and yet remains singularly uninformed about the inner workings of such institutions. The busiest section on my own website is one containing seventy-odd photographs of English prisons, something I started after

the demise of the Penal Lexicon site last year. It is useful to have this book if only to give to people who want an insight and an idea of what prison is really like.

At £40, it is not a cheap book. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of work and effort that has gone into the work makes it well worth the price.

Steve Taylor. P O Box 2728, Stratford upon Avon. CV37 0YL. Email steve@stetay.com Web www.stetay.com

The Interview

Anne Owers

Anne Owers took over in 2001 from Sir David Ramsbotham as HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons for England and Wales having previously been Director of Justice from 1992. Her early career was spent researching and teaching in Zambia. She worked at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and became its general secretary in 1986. Other appointments and publications reflect Anne Owers' interests in refugees, immigration and nationality, human rights and legal issues.

Interview by **Nigel Hancock**

Anne Owers spoke first of her earliest impressions of prisons and of work with prisoners.

'I remember visiting Brixton when I was doing legal advice work in South London. I had the impression of being in a very strange, unfamiliar and alienating environment, but was of course dipping in and out of it. The first prison I ever visited was Latchmere House when it was holding immigration detainees in the mid 1980s. I was working with the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and one of our roles was dealing with people who were in immigration detention. So it was an interesting circularity for me that, just as I joined the Inspectorate, we were starting a thematic review of immigration detention following an addition to my post's statutory responsibilities. Fifteen years down the line Latchmere House is much changed.'

While I was at Justice I worked with prisoners who claimed that they were wrongly imprisoned. The legal advice to prisoners role was very different to my present one. When I first went there we were dealing with a lot of individual cases that were potential miscarriages of justice. We received about 1,000 letters a year from serving prisoners. That changed partly because we were successful in persuading the then government to set up the Criminal Cases Review Commission which could do the job much more effectively and quickly than we could. Legal officers would go out to see people but a lot of the work was done by correspondence rather than by direct visit.'



Could the new Chief Inspector give her impressions of prisons in England and Wales now and of the overall prison system?

'In the last few months I have inspected about 14 and visited a further 15. So I have seen a good proportion of the growing prison estate quite quickly. I have seen prisons in action as part of my own learning curve and then seen them during inspection. I have been there for the last two days of full inspections and at the debriefs with the governor and the senior management team. I have also done one full inspection with each of our three inspection teams starting from the first day and going on to the fifth day, so that I can get a feel for how the business is done, how the information is compiled and how the teams work. That has been immensely useful.'

Prisons are so different, and just talking about a 'prison system' somehow implies a consistency that may not be possible. I do not yet have a full picture of the prison estate, for example of women's prisons or of dispersal prisons. A key impression though is that the prison system is good at coping, and prides itself on doing well with the resources it has. It copes surprisingly well given what is thrown at it: with increased numbers of women and of juveniles; with children in prison; with people who are mentally ill and disturbed in various ways; and with immigration detainees.'

There is a stress on crisis management, on fire fighting. Prisons are always conscious that they are on the edge, that they are only a days away from the next disturbing suicide, the next bed watch. Prisons exist in a constant state of anxiety. This coping mechanism

sometimes gets in the way of admitting that there are situations when they cannot cope. Prisons could be saying we cannot cope, we should not be expected to cope. But the mindset is not one that easily allows such messages to be said or to be received within the Prison Service or the Home Office. For example, the health care centre in one prison we visited recently was almost fifty per cent under-staffed, not through the fault of the prison but through difficulties in recruitment and retention. It was coping with 26 patients and out of those about seven were in the view of our doctor, who is a psychiatrist, sectionable under the Mental Health Act. The prison could not provide a safe and decent environment for the people it was holding, nor indeed a safe and decent environment for staff who were looking after them. But the pressure was always to cope, to cope with 24 hour watches of people who were so suicidal that they would take apart a magazine to get a staple to open a wound. At one level that is a testimony to staff dealing with very difficult people. It is no testimony to the capacity of a management system to pass messages back up the line and for something to be done about it'.

Anne Owers spoke about the Inspectorate's role in helping the Prison Service to identify and address such problems, and the factors that affect the strength or otherwise of prison cultures.

'Part of our function is to come in with a template of what is right in prisons, what you should expect to see in a prison that is providing a decent and dignified environment, and to hold that up against what we find in the prison. That is not necessarily an exercise in blame, but in helping people to test what they are doing against what most prisons want to be doing or what they should be doing. The management systems within prisons are often felt to be systems of blame and not systems of support.

Prisons work best where there is a common view of what a prison is for and that view is shared by everyone from the governing governor to the uniformed officer on the landing or the wing. Where there is a sense of shared ownership and belonging, the culture works positively even if the prison cannot deliver ideally what it would like to. A crucial link in that internal culture within prisons is the senior ranks of uniformed officers. They are going to be the ones that are around most of the time, around the longest. They are also going to be the ones who can sit on their hands and think we'll get a new governor in three or four years time anyway, and he/she will have a different business plan so let's just do the least we can and see what happens. For a prison to have and sustain a positive culture, principal officers and senior officers need to be signed up to it. Management of these processes is crucial for the Prison Service to capture. It has to strengthen positive cultures, and to train and support, and that is not always happening. There have not always been good training opportunities for these levels of staff. Very negative cultures can grow where you have a gap between the senior uniformed staff and the lower level of the governor grade. Positive initiatives can fall down this gap.

At present, there is a very positive mood music coming out of the Prison Service, from the Director General and Ministers, about what positively should be expected of prisons including a core resettlement agenda. About prisons being places in which you can work with severely damaged people. This, together with the decency and dignity agenda, and the determination to root out racism, comprise a very helpful public agenda to be coming into, one that my predecessor did

not have at all times. Our job as an Inspectorate is reporting honestly and objectively on how that agenda is working out on the ground. I think there is a real danger in something as complex as the Prison Service, an area that does not attract huge public support, huge investment of resources, or public popularity, that there is a gap between the virtual prison system that Ministers are saying that they want, and what the Director General wants, and the real prison system that is operating on the ground. That is one of the reason why as an Inspectorate we do not look at processes, we do not look at ticking boxes, and we do not look at audits. We look at outcomes, we look to see what actually is happening to the prisoners in particular places, and then we try and work out why it is happening.'

We discussed the Prison Service's managerial culture, and the Chief Inspector set out her views.

'It is important for management to be able to monitor and know what is going on in prisons. The problem with performance management, and certainly initially the targets that are set, is that it tends to measure what is measurable and not necessarily what is important. It has been good at measuring process, measuring whether you have a sentence planning mechanism in place or how many escapes you have had. What it is not good at is measuring what differences those things make and whether they operate in practice. Sentence planning is a good example. I have been in prisons where they have wonderful processes for sentence planning, absolutely beautiful sentence planning files. The reason they are so beautiful is that no-one has ever taken them out of the filing cabinet. They do not relate to what the prison needs or what the prison can offer. They contain targets which may not be time bound and which may not be implementable. It is important to have processes in place, but they are only baselines. If people concentrate simply on hitting those targets there is a real danger that they will concentrate on reaching the lowest common denominator of something that is satisfactory but not good.

There are very few incentives to reach what is good so what we look at is the quality of the outcomes that are coming out of those processes. Targets not well set can distort activity in prisons because clearly people target their activity towards meeting the targets. They say we'll offer what the area manager would want to see, what the Deputy Director General would want to see. As a result, the information reported back can be 'optimistic' about what is going on in the prisons concerned. Countless times it does not seem to relate to what is going on in terms of purposeful activity. The result of course is that the area manager will not know the prison is under resourced in certain areas. Information will not get fed back because people try to show that they have hit their targets. Activity is distorted.

A classic example is the concentration in education on hitting level 2 literacy and numeracy skills. It is absolutely right that the Prison Service should say it would like all its prisoners to go out with level 2 because level 2 is the employability level, and that is very important for people to have. But what we find over and over again is that on assessment on entry to prison 60-70 per cent of people are below level 1 literacy and numeracy. If your target is to hit level 2, the real danger is that you skim the people that meet level 2 or who are already above level 2. You hit your targets on what you are not providing. You do not provide the stepping stone, the ladders that the people at those lower levels need. Because performance targets are across the board they do not necessarily meet the individual needs of particular prisoners and the needs in particular prisons. Prisons

should conduct needs assessment and from that work out targets above the level the Prison Service requires'.

At the time of the interview, Anne Owers had not formally inspected a women's prison. She spoke about the organisation of the women's prison system in England and Wales, about the optimum size of prisons, and about young offenders and the mentally ill.

'I have views on the size and deployment of prisons in general and they apply particularly to women prisoners. There are particular issues about holding women in the areas from which they come. Sixty per cent of women in prison have primary care of children under 16 years. The resettlement needs of women prisoners are often very different from those of men. We should be looking at more smaller units and not large units. I would like to see us move closer to the notion that Lord Woolf had in his report about community prisons. The local prisons I have seen working best are small prisons. Locals have an enormous difficulty because they are trying to hit so many targets at once. They are servicing the courts. As the pressure point of the population changes, they have little control over who they get and when. They have very difficult prisoners to manage. But it is much easier to manage a smaller court or prison than a large one. Particularly if you are starting from scratch, we should be looking at smaller units spread more geographically.

Similarly we should not be holding children in prison, in prisons which hold nearly 400 in units of nearly 60. That is simply not an environment in which you should hold extremely disturbed, adolescent young men. Doing so creates very difficult problems. I think it vital that the women's and juvenile estates move towards smaller units.

The Inspectorate can point out what is happening with certain groups of people in prisons. There have been some huge improvements in the juvenile estate following the creation of the Youth Justice Board. That is in some ways difficult for prisons where young people are held because the Youth Justice Board's approach is a very child centred approach and prisons are more accustomed to well organised and controlled regime approaches. There is a clash of cultures involved. My predecessor thought so and I would also say that, ideally, 15-17 year olds should not be held in prisons. If there are circumstances where they need to be detained, there are other more appropriate facilities with much greater staff ratios and clustered resources. The budget for educating a 15-17 year old child in prison is £1,800 a year. For a child in a secure training centre or local secure unit, the budget is £15,000 a year. You start to ask what ought a child to expect growing up in a custodial environment. That's the question you ask of the prison.

We have recently found more seriously mentally ill people in a number of prisons than we did the last time they were inspected. Although people are moving on into medium secure or secure facilities within the National Health Service, there is still a huge blockage. There is still a tendency to accept that if someone seriously mentally ill is in prison, and therefore off the streets, their place towards the top of the waiting list should be taken by someone who is outside the seriously mentally ill category but potentially difficult within the community. Prisons are holding people who should not be in prison but should be in a therapeutic environment. Prisons should not be expected to cope. There is a need for an intermediate estate to hold mentally ill offenders. There is also a need for seminars on particular areas of suicide, self-harm and bullying where people from all relevant

prisons can get together and can learn from each others, from their mistakes and successes, and forge links between them. There is too little sharing of information and good practice within the Prison Service.'

How did the new Chief Inspector regard the development of standards in the Prison Service?

'There is a real danger of divorcing policy and standards from people at the operational level. Some policies look wonderful but if you are running them they do not always work in quite the way that you envisaged. In fact they can have the opposite effect. To share good practice and to learn from each other and really start driving standards up is something a good functional manager could do. It is just as important as making sure that the performance targets are met.

We very much welcome the fact that the Prison Service is revising its Standards at the moment and that there is a greater stress on quality. We welcome the very good dialogue that has taken place in the last six months about our Expectations document, the criteria by which we inspect, and the extent to which Prison Service Standards can move closer to our Expectations. There have been considerable movements but inevitably the Standards in the Prison Service for those running prisons will be largely about processes because that is what is easily measurable. It will also be about what the Prison Service knows it can deliver and has the resources to deliver. It is no good requiring a prison governor to deliver something for which there are no resources. No establishment should serve the evening meal earlier than 5pm in the afternoon. We went to a young offender institution where 19 years old lads were having their meals at 4pm, meals which might well have to last them until breakfast the next morning. This is not right, but equally if you cannot staff a prison to do anything else then standards cannot be imposed on them. We will always be in the business of driving up standards and inserting quality and outcome criteria into the Standards'.