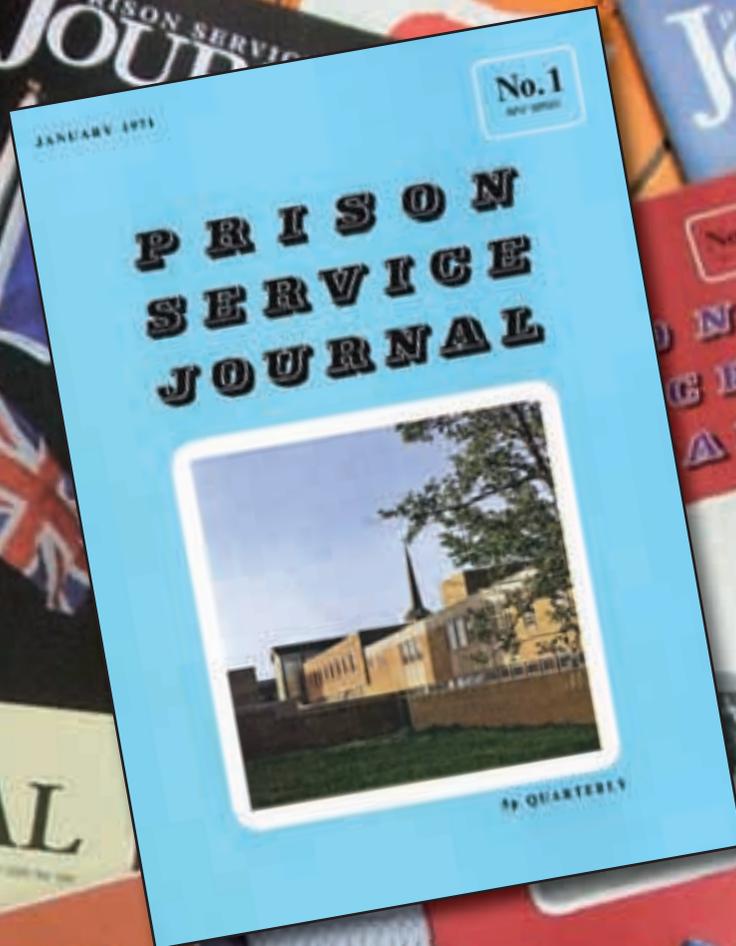


PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2012 No 200



200th Edition

About Parole

At the time of writing **Alan Bilton** was a former member of the Probation and After-care Service who was reading for a social studies degree at the University of Hull. **Keith Bottomley** was a lecturer in criminology and penal policy at University of Hull and is now an Emeritus Professor of criminology at University of Hull.

Interviewed by the Hull Prison magazine Contact, Lord Hunt, chairman of the Parole Board, is quoted as saying: 'I am concerned about your contention that the average prisoner feels that he does not have enough 'say', and is therefore apathetic about parole. It may be that we should try to get a wider survey of prisoners' opinions on this point'. This article summarises the findings of a small survey carried out in Hull Prison during March-April 1970, with such an aim in mind. Any survey of this kind is bound to be more or less 'unrepresentative' of a wider population, and it is not claimed that these attitudes are necessarily typical of all eligible prisoners in the country as a whole; however, this is a representative group of prisoners at Hull, and therefore the attitudes are only likely to be as typical as Hull itself is a typical prison.

At the time of the survey, Hull was a maximum security prison with an average daily population of 260 inmates, serving sentences of a minimum of five years; there was a small minority of men serving over 10 years, but the average length of sentence was six years. Over 40 per cent were serving sentences for offences of violence against the person, and a further 10 per cent for sexual offences; about 30 per cent had been convicted of breaking and entering offences, and the only other significantly large group of offenders was that of those convicted of fraud and false pretences (9 per cent).

Twenty-five per cent of the men had been sentenced for violence as their main offence; the proportion of 'breaking and entering' offenders was uncharacteristically high at 45 per cent (compared to 30 per cent in the prison), as was that of sex offenders at 17 per cent (compared to 10 per cent in the prison as a whole), although this was largely due to the inclusion by chance of four men serving sentences for living on immoral earnings.

Only three men had been granted parole and were approaching their date of release on licence; of the remainder, two had declined to be considered, and 35 had been refused parole. However, a fifth of the sample (eight men) had been recommended for parole by the Local Review Committee, which represents the average proportion recommended at this particular prison in the year ending March 1970. The 35 men who had been refused parole were asked what they thought were the likely reasons for their

rejection, and more than a third (13) said they had no idea; the largest group giving a definite answer to this question were those nine who believed that their past criminal record was mainly responsible. Almost all expressed the view that they should be given some explanation of the refusal, as most felt this would help them, where practicable, to try to 'put it right' for their next review.

Who decides and how

Many men held rather cynical views on the 'real reasons' why parole was introduced. Almost half (19) said at once that the purpose was to empty the prisons. A further eight men believed the system was brought in to justify the longer sentences which they were convinced were a conscious policy within the penal system. Only one respondent gave as the sole reason 'to give men a chance', and his view was perhaps offset by the man who saw it all as a manoeuvre to 'employ more civil servants'!

Disappointment with the working of the system so far was common — perhaps understandably so among a group of prisoners of whom so many had been rejected. Twenty-five felt it had not operated as they had hoped it might and of the 13 who said their expectations had been borne out, six indicated that this was simply due to having hoped for little or nothing from the system as a whole. As at present operated, men were unable to detect any clear aim or principle — 24 said they had no idea what these were and many mentioned particular examples which seemed to them entirely contradictory. Only four (10 per cent) felt that the main aim was to benefit the prisoner.

When asked what ought to be the main aims or principles, respondents were seldom specific; the largest single group suggested 'to give a *real* chance to *all*', with the implication that the present scheme was offering largely false hopes and appeared to be only for the few. There was similar difficulty in pinpointing what were the main factors determining the parole decision in a given case. Once again, 12 (30 per cent) felt that their experience to date had been so conflicting as to prevent any reliable assessment of the various factors involved; but nine believed past record to be the main factor, a further nine thought reports from the police and prison staff, eight mentioned the domestic situation and only two work prospects.

Review procedures

There were many suggestions put forward to improve parole review procedures, of which the main one was the promotion of greater involvement of the prisoners concerned. Fifteen men felt that decisions were taken by people remote from the prisoner who, under present arrangements, was 'excluded'. Five men thought the system should be 'more independent', and four that they should appear in person before whatever body made the *final* decision. Thirty-five felt very strongly that they should have the right to a personal appearance before the Local Review Committee, although five more believed this would be unhelpful.

The preparatory interview with a member of the Local Review Committee was seen in sharply differing ways. Nineteen men saw no purpose in it, whilst 16 found it helpful — mainly 'to put your case'. Opinion on the value of written representations was similarly divided; 14 described it as useless, seven felt it inadequate, three positively unfair on those of limited literacy, but 16 (some with reservations) considered it worthwhile 'to have your say'.

The system of each prison having its own Local Review Committee was generally favoured, with 27 supporting and only nine opposed to it.

Effects on prison organisation

The majority view was that the introduction of parole had had no noticeable effects on other aspects of prison life and administration. Although 10 believed it had made no appreciable difference, yet 25 men felt that it had had a valuable effect in reducing 'trouble' in general and violence in particular. Perhaps rather contradictorily, a greater majority (31 men) thought that its introduction had not altered prisoners' attitudes and conduct towards staff, with many referring specifically to Hull where, they said, 'things have always been good here'.

None had noticed any change with regard to labour allocation and most felt similarly about the effect on the hostel scheme; however, on this aspect, six men expressed the view that the policy of sending men selected for parole to hostel, prior to release on licence, in some way took places from others not so favoured with parole.

Parole Supervision

The value of supervision on licence divided opinion fairly evenly; 16 considered it would be of no help, 14 took the opposite view, and 10 felt it might, in the right circumstances, be of assistance. There was more agreement as to the form which 'help' should take. Apart from 10 who stated that neither material nor non-material help would be worthwhile ('If I can't sort these things out for myself, I shouldn't be given parole'), 14 men saw only the material form of help as relevant and only three mentioned 'personal problem' help as most important.

A number of men described previous adverse experience of the Probation and After-care Service, but there was no broad area of agreement when respondents were asked to suggest improvements in the supervision arrangements. Thirteen had no suggestions, and five recommended its total abolition, but seven saw no need for alteration. In particular, four said they would prefer to report to the police and five others wanted more flexible conditions. Overall, there seemed to be an expectation that the requirements of licence might be too rigidly enforced, although this view does not seem as yet to have been confirmed in view of the small number of parolees

The majority view was that the introduction of parole had had no noticeable effects on other aspects of prison life and administration.

recalled simply for breach of requirement without committing further offences.

In terms of parole, during the year immediately before the survey the proportion of men who declined to be considered for parole at Hull was almost double the national average, and of those who wished to be considered, the proportion who were granted was slightly over half the national average. These figures must be kept in mind when considering the results of this survey and they may perhaps explain some of the rather pessimistic and cynical attitudes expressed by these men, of whom the majority had been *rejected* for parole. It would be invaluable to make a comparative study of attitudes in a prison where many more are granted parole.

In view of the fact that a larger study of all parole review cases in the year ending March 1970, was being carried out in the same prison, by one of the authors, it was decided to select for interview from this main sample those prisoners who were reviewed for parole in September and December 1969. In the event, a few prisoners were also interviewed who were reviewed in October 1969 and December 1969.

A total of 42 prisoners were approached, of whom only two declined to be interviewed, when the purpose was explained to them. The interviews were conducted in private and assurances of confidentiality and the independence of the interviewer from prison and parole authorities appeared to be readily accepted by all respondents. The interviews lasted usually for about an hour each and were based on a structural but 'open-ended' schedule of questions.

The sample

Of the 40 men interviewed, 21 (52 per cent) were serving a sentence of five years, six (15 per cent) were serving six years, seven (17 per cent) seven years and six were serving eight years or more. These proportions are almost exactly the same as were found in a census of the prison's population taken in March 1969. Two-thirds of the sample interviewed were aged between 26-35 years, and only five over 45 years. Exactly half the men were separated or divorced, 11 were single, and nine married.

Conclusions

It was notable that many men, even when expressing a decidedly minority view, believed that theirs was the generally held opinion. There was a widespread view that far too much emphasis was laid on written reports ('those bits of paper'), and that not enough was done to discover 'the man behind the forms'. Despite its wide ventilation as a topic of discussion among prisoners, some of whom were very well informed, there was also considerable confusion as to the actual practice of procedure, and a few were convinced that their application for parole 'never left the prison'. In a sample so heavily weighted with men who had been refused parole, some disappointment is readily understandable, but many tried to be objective and yet still found the system unjust and, more particularly, 'too secret'. The great majority believed that there was still an over-cautious policy of selection, and that until this was relaxed the scheme would continue to be regarded with, at least suspicion, if not cynicism.