

“Change doth unknit the tranquil strength of man”*

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In a programme of change, many people believe that providing you give out enough information and let others know what is going on, things will be alright. In reality, getting people to engage willingly and co-operatively in the process and consequences of change is never quite that easy.

So it is with Fresh Start. The gloss of novelty (which many believe never spread very much further than issues of pay) is now wearing thin and has given way to some traditionally unburnished attitudes of scepticism and distrust. Rather like ‘Murder on the Orient Express’, everyone is charged with a crime: naive consultants, gullible managers at Headquarters, incurious Governors, heartless Manpower Teams and, not least, artless union negotiators. But, while the search for the guilty goes on, it is perhaps worth reflecting and reminding ourselves of life before Fresh Start.

Systems Failures

Systems of attendance both under Scheme V and Functional Group Working failed to provide conditioned attendance at certain periods in the week. This was particularly so in respect of Scheme V which on Friday evenings and at parts of the weekend, provided no conditioned capability of main grade staff; FGW threw up similar shortfalls in respect of Senior Officers. Both systems,

then, were dependent on ‘built in’ overtime in order to cover duties essential to security and control. Over the years negotiations at local level had been characterised by a general failure to halt the growth in task lists, staffing levels, or both. The steady rise in authorised staffing levels (ASL) widened further the gap between what was officially required to cover the work and the number of staff actually in post (SIP). The greater the distance between ASL and SIP the greater the risk to regimes. The only protection on offer was through overtime — and overtime was voluntary.

Efforts to narrow the gap between ASL and SIP through renewed recruitment initiatives yielded little improvement. Across the Service, the task line had risen to such a pitch that hundreds of tasks each day were being left undone. Any potential threat which new recruits might bring to established levels of overtime was easily countered by the immediate resurrection of dropped tasks. In short, regimes were not in the control of Governors, but had become overtime levers in the hands of staff. In many places, local agreement provided for the display of the daily detail sufficiently in advance for staff to opt out of the overtime necessary for its fulfilment in accordance with individual preference for a particular duty. Whilst some might regard such behaviour as inconsistent with

claimed professional status, it is nevertheless a feature of classical trade unionism within which context it can be seen as legitimate.

Management Failures

More was wrong in this area of “resource management” than the space afforded here could begin to address in detail. The low priority of staff training and career development, deficiencies in personnel systems, the growing complexity of disciplinary procedures, the over-specialisation of detailing practice and rules governing allowances, both equally exclusive to general management understanding, were all areas characterised either by serious neglect or lack of control. Any student of industrial relations could have seen the massive discrepancy between working arrangements in our establishments and the realities of the wider industrial relations landscape. We might ourselves have seen that change was on the way because Governors of establishments were being brought increasingly and more directly into accountability for finance, regime delivery and general resource management.

A major recomposition of the economy of interests and the relations of power within establishments was long overdue. It is inevitable but a matter for some regret that this truth becomes increasingly obscured beneath a patina of complaint, criti-

cism and undeserving nostalgic reflection.

In short, our organisational arrangements were just wrong and there is little, if anything, about the old agenda for which to shed a tear.

Structural Failures

Before Fresh Start, lines of accountability were far from clear in many of our establishments. Differing preferences for centralised or de-centralised deployment of middle managers; a profusion of custom-built management models; fudged issues of role and seniority; unsatisfactory arrangements for the writing and counter-signing of staff reports; a proliferation of strained relationships left largely unchecked or unresolved; and little concept of corporate management. These and other deficiencies characterised organisational settings no longer in tune with a political scenario that, by degrees, has established Governors ever more visibly with accountable management. The old structures, if such they can be called, are made redundant not solely by the Fresh Start but, more significantly, by the need to divest the system of outmoded and largely unproductive practices trading, as they did, on relations of power and status not connected to the legitimate demands of the organisation.

That wastage of considerable proportion existed was obscured by a combination of inefficient structural arrangements, organisational rituals, outmoded benevolence and a general disregard for public expenditure which had been evident at all levels of the Service. Such changes were never going to be easy. Concerns of power and status do not readily lend themselves to dispassionate dialogue.

Response Failures

Much is made of man's unwillingness to accept the notion and consequences of change. It is therefore tempting to assume failure rather than look to improve design, development or implementation methods. Equally, a sustained and widespread barrage of controversy in response to change can weaken the confidence of those responsible for putting the package together. Where doubts emerge, they are usually associated with a concentration on issues rather than basic principles. The outcome is often a loss or blurring of a broader vision and a general disregard for the early imperatives of change. In this respect, the

drive to evaluate an exercise before it is yet fully in place is likely to say more about the dynamics of passion than about sound empirical analysis.

Evidence of widespread discontent is said to be available in criticisms over the timescale within which the Fresh Start initiative was assembled and delivered. In organisations of similar size and complexity, such programmes, we are told, would be spread over something like a 5 year period. Critics trading on this belief allege insufficient attention to detail; over-hurried negotiations at national level; limited evidence that the proposed new systems actually worked in practice; poorly organised preparatory training for managers; and so on. A lack of consistency between the four regions in the way their programmes were approached is also implied: the argument and counter-argument over the scheduling or non-scheduling of contract hours; the rights and wrongs of the four day week; judgements about grading in specialist sections; attitudes to civilianisation; not least, insufficiently robust approaches to complementing issues. Such inconsistencies, it is said, have failed to assist the management of change.

Praise re-inspires the brave no less fervently than criticism stirs the innocent, and the Regions' Implementation Teams complain of a conspiracy which changed the rules mid-way through the game; that their guidelines became mousetraps baited for Manpower Teams; that the 10% efficiency objective only emerged when it became clear that the deal struck between the Department and the Treasury was not on firm ground; that many decisions were taken on 'technical' matters without advice from the experts; that in order to complete the programmes within an ever changing timetable, additional teams had to be hurriedly recruited and put into action with limited preparation and technical skills. And so it goes on, to the particular delight of the antagonist and to the general benefit of none.

Looking to Success

It is difficult to know whether the most publicised responses to the new arrangements are representative of a true groundswell of opinion. At the time of writing (January 1988), action by the Prison Officers' Association over the civilianisation issue is 'pending' having secured a substantial majority in favour from those voting.

But even this is not necessarily a predictor of feeling about the Fresh Start package in general.

Undoubtedly, the issue that has caused the greatest uncertainty has been that of meeting agreed complementing levels. If these can be achieved and the anticipated improvements in working arrangements become manifest we shall be more reliably based.

Is it useful at this stage, then, to give meaning to the dissatisfaction being voiced? Many of the criticisms about the process of change hold more than a grain of truth. Many of the difficulties inherent in any programme of change exist and could not have been avoided. Many operational problems have emerged as a result of the new arrangements. Though all of this is true, it has relevance only within a narrowly focused view of what the Fresh Start initiative is all about. It is a view reflected by many-wintered crows who hop around prison establishments and caw about how things used to be.

A more imaginative view is that the Fresh Start is not an end in itself, but a means — a management tool which, at present, handles somewhat less effortlessly than we would like. It is a view broader than working systems and management structures. Rather, it sees the new arrangements as shaping systems, structures and the relations of power in accordance with the realities of changing circumstances and demand. In practical terms, Governors can regard their systems and organisational arrangements as evolutionary so that the imbalances of the past are minimised and the prospects of improved regimes and job enrichment can be realised. As this understanding develops, greater efficiency will be found in order to resource what are the founding principles of the Fresh Start initiative.

The new model does not offer inflexible lines and relationships; but a conceptual arrangement to be applied with purpose and imagination to minimise waste and maximise commitment and versatility. Current criticism should not be allowed to reinforce self-doubt and culprit hunting: there are no villains. The new arrangements bring meaning: the management of meaning, therefore, becomes a critical challenge for today's managers. ■

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