

A VIEW FROM

The Chairman of the Prison Officers Association at Gloucester

Byron Hughes

Having been a prison officer for twenty two years and a branch official of the Prison Officers' Association since 1974 I have experienced a great deal of change in various ways within the Prison Service.

Much has changed for the better both with regard to attitudes towards treatment and care of inmates and also with regard to the general conditions that prison officers work under. We have consistently moved forward and adapted to changing policies. There has, however, been retained a totally professional attitude towards our work. We can I feel be justifiably proud of what we choose to do for a living.

Regrettably, however, there is one aspect of change which has occurred mainly during the 1980s which mars and contaminates much that has changed for the better. This, in my opinion, is the unfortunate but very real decline in industrial relations between the Home Office Prison Department and the Prison Officers' Association. What was once a tightly knit and well motivated team effort by both management and the POA, and through them the whole staff has now become a very them and us situation, with neither side having any trust or confidence in the other. This was brought about mainly by management on the one hand, having to implement financial restrictions more appropriate to production line industry in a Prison Service under increasing pressure: and the POA on the other,

resisting these initiatives both in defence of what we genuinely believed to be safe manning levels, and also to safeguard an earnings structure that had for far too long, and with managerial blessing, been dependant on high levels of overtime working. Management regrettably, were content to opt out of responsibility to effect change of the system which was obviously unsatisfactory. Therefore, when financial restraints on overtime working were imposed without heed to the need for realistic pay rates, resentment was provoked.

Resentment and total breakdown of industrial relations was to culminate in the very regrettable and acrimonious industrial action of 1986.

Then finally and it seemed not before time out of the ashes of 1986 rose the phoenix called Fresh Start. A fresh start it was claimed that would finally lay to rest the hostility and the problems of the Prison Service.

This so called fresh start was anticipated with mixed reaction. It could be either one of two things. On the one hand it could mean a new beginning with the old conflicts and misunderstandings being discarded, making way for something better and worthwhile. On the other hand sceptics believed it was no more than the code name for a new kind of financial initiative that sought to secure certain strategic financial gains.

Whichever it is, if it is to have any hope of meaningful success then it must be a venture undertaken by all

with a vested interest in the Prison Service. It must also be by consent, with consensus of objective and most importantly, based upon mutual trust.

It was with trepidation and in hope, tempered with some suspicion that the Prison Service moved towards Fresh Start. Optimists blind to betrayal, pessimists warning of it, the Home Office Prison Department reassuring both and pleading for trust and acceptance.

Bulletins were issued in order, so it was believed, that there should be no misunderstanding and that everyone should know exactly what was going to happen and how it would affect them.

The pessimists in our midst were beginning to lose credibility. The Home Office Prison Department would surely not commit to writing these things if they were not true would they? Well it would seem that the majority of prison officers believed because they voted for the acceptance of Fresh Start.

It was at this time, and for the first time for many years in the Prison Service there was a commitment on the part of prison officers to say 'let's shake on it, let's give it a go'.

Any management worthy of the word should have capitalised fully on this situation, thanked God for having got it right at last, and had a united Prison Service into the future. This is what we believed was happening, but of course it could only happen, if in fact the now so controversial Bulletin 8 was what it purported to be; and that

it was a considered and honest foundation stone to build upon representing squarely and honestly the views of management as agreed with the POA. It had to be this because it was what prison officers had voted on, it was what they had placed their trust in and therefore, should have stood as a monument to Fresh Start.

Management of the Prison Service however, were unable to take advantage of the situation. Unable to lead, able only to provoke within months of Fresh Start a ballot by prison officers securing a majority of 3 to 1 in favour of taking industrial action. And why? Because Bulletin 8, the foundation stone was so riddled with inaccuracy, it's promises meaningless and coupled with total confusion and misunderstanding over proposed recruitment plans. Industrial Relations were again back at rock bottom followed once again by the predictable churning out of propaganda passing blame like some sore ridden buck from one side to the other resulting in another round of trench warfare and total loss of what should have been a new found trust. It is, in my opinion, about time that Her Majesty's Home Secretary if he cares at all should know the facts, know that prison officers were willing to commit themselves, that prison officers were willing to start afresh, but also that undeniably they were told lies. What we saw as clear agreements have been reneged on.

We kept our side of the bargain. We accepted changes in working practices, we accepted economy regarding manning levels, we accepted the concept of greater efficiency in return for better pay and time off but we also accepted that what we had been told would be the objectives and rules governing implementation of Fresh Start were honest and well-founded. It was not so.

We were promised a level of recruitment that would ensure success of Fresh Start without having to accept

dangerously low manning levels. Having accepted Fresh Start, proposed recruiting numbers were reduced.

We were promised unification. What we in fact have is an undeniable split between, on the one hand, Grades Five and above, and, on the other, Grades Six and below. With one set of rules and conditions for the one, denied to the other: the gap becoming wider as the so called framework agreement progresses. There also occurred the creation of what seems like a Board of Directors consisting of Grades Five and above, and a shop floor of Grades Six and below, coupled with an absence of a co-ordinating works manager (the old Chief Officer) responsible for liaison between the Board and the shop floor. We were promised a 'Pride in Ownership' of the Service brought about by increased job satisfaction and motivation. We find in fact very little of either. Civilianisation, we are told, will release prison officers to do the work they are best at — face to face work with inmates. We see the ultimate result as being face to face with stress, more and more turned into guards. Regimes are already contracted, workshops are almost a thing of the past. Even further reductions in manning availability brought about by the erosion of contract hours must inevitably cause even further restriction of regimes. This along with the loss of job variety which goes hand in hand with increased civilianisation presents a very bleak prospect to prison officers at ground floor level. The option of Fresh Start being merely a code name for financial restriction becomes an increasing reality.

We were also promised other things, mainly via Bulletin 8, such as ability to arrive at locally agreed working systems for Fresh Start, best reflecting the ability to meet local needs. It was not to be. Instead we have had forced upon us a multiplicity of working systems, which, as time

progresses, will do very little to meet local needs. We were promised an ability to reach local agreements governing implementation, again best suited to local needs and in the mutual interests of both management and staff. No such agreements exist unless they are seen by Regional Directors and Home Office Officials to comply with their interpretation of the rules. Certainly there is no local autonomy. While there is no trust and confidence mutually expressed between the Home Office Prison Department and the POA, there also does not seem to be much between the HOPD and the Governors.

Once again it comes down to Bulletin 8. If it had been properly considered, worked through to remove all ambiguity, and left as a clear statement of agreed principles; then local agreements would have been easily and amicably reached.

At the time of writing, it would appear that it's another fine mess we find ourselves in. However, we must conclude that it is never too late. Although we have now balloted to accept a course of industrial action if it proves inevitable, we sincerely hope that it will not, and that common sense and sanity will eventually prevail. If it does, then let's hope that, finally there will come into being a realisation that there must be mutual trust. There must be a commitment to honour agreements, and management must accept responsibility to ensure that they get all their facts right. They must be certain of their facts before they make offers to the members of the Prison Service, because anything less must result in conflict.

We do, I think, have a history in the Service of rarely getting things right the first time; remember the common working agreement? So let's set our sights on Fresh Start Mk2 and let's hope for all our sakes that we get that right. ■

READERS Write

THE EDITOR
Prison Service Journal

Dear Sir,
Your last issue concentrated upon gender and imprisonment. As a member of a board of visitors with experi-

ence of both male and female parts of the system, I would like to add several points about the meaning of imprisonment to women.

Whenever the Courts are in doubt as to whether to imprison a woman, what criteria do they consider? Is it not often that the middle class, good wife and mother escapes custody; unlike the woman who is poor, single, promiscuous, battered, homeless and over-proportionately black who so positively attracts it? Whereas society continues to accept the sharply esca-

lating male criminal population, female offenders are frequently seen as being women of positively abnormal nature.

Frequently Courts face the dilemma of securing adequate accommodation for those known to be seriously disturbed and/or mentally ill. Though it is accepted that prisons were never intended as depositories for such cases, all too often there is simply no practical alternative. Women still tend to attract custodial sentences for less serious offences than do men. The present female prison population