

A VIEW FROM **The Director of Personnel and Finance**

Joe Pilling

When I returned to the Prison Service in May 1987 after a gap of 5½ years a few immediate impressions registered even before Fresh Start. Cleland House feels like a Headquarters whereas Ecclestone Square had moved the cheerful to be glum and the depressive to be suicidal. The Prisons Board has bedded down and is playing the part that its architects had intended. Newbold Revel has been acquired though circumstances have so far prevented it from fulfilling its natural role. It is ideally suited to be the symbol and focus of all that is best in the Prison Service and will no doubt become that in due course. Above all Headquarters has a stronger link with the wider Service which is presented effectively to the rest of the Home Office and more widely in the criminal justice system.

But it was only a matter of days before I realised that my working life was going to be dominated for a long time to come by something called Fresh Start. It was curious to find myself as the adoptive parent or wet nurse of a scheme in whose conception and gestation I had played no part. But it was not difficult to persuade myself that the infant was healthy and much needed.

I am too close to Fresh Start to be objective and we are all too close to it to be anywhere near developing a historical perspective. In this article, written as a member of the Board working for the greater part of every day on aspects of Fresh Start, I simply want to offer some reflections organised around four questions -

- why did we do it?
- how are we doing?
- what will it look like when it settles down?
- have we lost our vision?

Since last May I have heard many

critical comments about aspects of Fresh Start but not one single person has said to me that we should have left things exactly as they were. We might look back nostalgically to some aspects of the good old days but we all recall features that we could not describe with pleasure or pride. Members of staff worked week in week out for year after year for numbers of hours that were bad for them, bad for their families and bad for the job. There was widespread recognition within the Service that work was organised inefficiently. Some examples were notorious. It was bad for our image and bad for our self-respect. Although the problems had been recognised, it seemed impossible to break into the system and do something about it.

Here and there for a period of years because of a coincidence of personalities the difficulties in the relationship between the chief officers and junior governor grades would be resolved satisfactorily and the system would work well. But the problems recurred too often and the success stories were too few to suggest anything but the need for a different structure. Could our talk about enhancing the role of prison officers and career development seem more than hollow when there were what must have seemed artificial barriers in the way of an officer's progress from the landings to the highest posts in the Service?

In running establishments almost everything turned on the person and personality of the governing governor. Fewer might have been critical of this than of some other features of the old systems but no-one would deny it. In an increasingly complex world it was an approach that put a limit on what even our best governors could achieve. In the nature of the system they tended to be involved in everything that happened. Change in every aspect of the

life of an establishment needed to be referred to them. Beneath the governor were many able, mature and senior staff frustrated by a lack of responsibility appropriate to their ability, maturity and seniority. It seemed that insights into management systems and structures well proven elsewhere in the public and private sectors—in the UK and overseas—were ignored in our Service.

It may seem unnecessarily morbid and negative to uncover these pre-Fresh Start sores at this stage. But I believe that it is healthy to keep doing it until we are through the teething troubles of the transition to Fresh Start. Nothing is better calculated to put our current difficulties into perspective.

With a copy deadline some months ahead of the publication date it is unwise to be too specific and detailed in considering how we are doing in moving to Fresh Start. If it was not clear to everyone a year ago, it is clear now that Fresh Start is a process and not an event. To get as much out of the opportunities as human frailties will allow will take a matter of years and not months. On top of that, as the Home Secretary has said in public more than once, no-one would have chosen to introduce Fresh Start against a background of a rapidly rising prison population. The speed of implementation was an added difficulty. It would have been quite impossible to move over on a single date across the whole of England and Wales but it was the unanimous view of all the senior managers to whom I talked that it would have been unfair to staff for implementation to have been strung out more than it was.

These are all factors that make it a small miracle that we have got as far as we have but there is ample evidence that we have no room for complacency. The observation—'We have done Fresh Start here. What's next?'—reveals

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of employment, derive basically from the way staff are rewarded, from whether they believe themselves to be part of a Service which offers satisfying jobs and opportunities for professional improvement and career advancement, and from whether or not there are sufficient numbers of staff to allow the required jobs to be done properly. Fresh Start was an attempt to attend to the first of these areas. Though a sense of unfairness through the transitional period may linger in the minds of some individuals because of what they regard as unacceptable changes imposed upon them, the overwhelmingly positive response to Fresh Start, when the matter was put to the vote

last year, was some indication that this particular objective had been achieved. But it also attempted to prepare the ground for advances in the other two areas. Certainly, restructuring gives the opportunity, bolstered by imaginative training and personnel management, for the development of careers on the basis of merit and achievement. And if this is accompanied by the progressive raising of entry standards, an evolutionary change of enduring significance can be achieved.

In the shorter-term, however, what must be attended to — as a matter of extreme urgency — is the conclusion of an agreement with the POA about staffing levels. A complementing system which can be accepted as providing fair levels of

staffing, determined on the basis of agreed measures, must now be put in place quickly. Devising such a system will be fraught with problems, but a start had already been made when Fresh Start was accepted and efforts must now be redoubled to complete the work. All complementing systems have their problems, the principal one being of making the system responsive to changing circumstances, but these are not insuperable.

If all this work can be satisfactorily completed, these perception of fairness can be used as the foundations for advances in the wider areas to which I have referred. And if this article serves to reinforce this wider Fresh Start vision, it will have served a useful purpose. ■

quite a lot about the speaker and quite a lot about the establishment but the message is not what the speaker intended to convey.

Not the least remarkable aspect of 1987, which should seem in time to have been a remarkable year for the Prison Service, is that we set about evaluating the move to Fresh Start as quickly as we did. The process has taught us a lot and developed our thinking to a further stage. At the time of writing it promises to have been a positive and constructive exercise pointing the way forward for the year ahead.

The short response to how we are doing seems to be pretty well considering and we have a clear view across the Service of what the next stages should be.

In the midst of the turmoil of transition it is encouraging to keep looking forward to the intended destination. We also need to keep doing it because each time we do some parts of the destination come a little clearer and every now and again some part is jettisoned and replaced by something else in the light of more experience. In a sense this is the counterpart of the catalogue of problems that drove us to Fresh Start.

I am looking for a Prison Service where

- everyone has a clearly defined and satisfying job with specific tasks on a specific timescale
- everyone knows to whom he is accountable and knows clearly what that person thinks of his performance

— everyone works hard but has ample leisure at reasonably predictable times

— annual staff reporting is rigorous, honest and open and helps to ensure that promotion to all levels is on merits

— the contribution of each occupational group is properly valued with the Service working as a multi-disciplinary team rather than fragmented by misunderstanding and rivalry

— anything that matters to us is measured, if it can be, so that we know whether we are doing well or badly

— we have a management system that helps us to make improvements year on year rather than relying on the accident of the right man in the right place to secure change despite the system

The necessary preoccupation with attendance systems and management structures in the last 2 or 3 years has prompted questions from time to time about a loss of vision. What about the prisoner? Has Fresh Start become an end in itself? I suppose that is the sort of questioning that I and other members of the Board find it easiest to understand and respond to. It is anxiety expressed for the highest motives.

My first response is that Fresh Start is a worthwhile end in itself (as well as a means) and it is quite wrong to be ashamed of it or apologetic for the time it has taken up. The features towards which we are moving and which I have just described are worth

it for their own sake in the interests of both our staff and the taxpayer. It is a proper object for stewards of public money to seek to get better value for that money.

Second, effective management systems and the efficient organisation of work are needed before we can deliver any vision that we might have. Fresh Start is a means as well as an end. Without the changes it brings we might dream but our dreams will not become a reality. There is no real tension between better management and better regimes for prisoners. The two complement each other and are not alternatives.

Finally, it may be true that management issues have sometimes seemed to loom large in the last year but the Board has found time to consider various aspects of regime delivery as well. Work has been going ahead on *A Sense of Direction* under Gordon Lakes' leadership. In June we studied the outcome of detailed Regional surveys of progress in carrying forward *A Sense of Direction*. At a later meeting further developmental work on regimes was commissioned and we undertook to return to the subject soon and to re-examine the issue of whether a 'mission statement' would help us meet our tasks.

The Board has kept its commitment to the fundamental tasks of the Service and there can be no doubt that staff at all levels in establishments are as keen as they ever have been to improve the service they provide. My firm belief is that in due course Fresh Start will be seen to have helped us to move up a whole gear in our delivery of that service. ■