Breaking Out

where next for prisons

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Prison costs

Prisons are expensive – both financially and socially. Beyond the ongoing controversy about who should be in custody and for how long, a hard question remains. At a cost of £1.4 billion a year, **is society getting value for money?** The answer is "not yet."

The cost of under-performance is significant. Beyond the financial bottom line, high levels of stress accompany low morale among staff. Inmates pass through without moving forward. Meanwhile, taxpayers meet the bill, without a clear sense of **what they are buying and why**.

A new approach to crime and punishment, based on **rights and responsibilities**, is central to current Government thinking. It has already stimulated discussion about how the police and courts should go about their business.

This debate cannot be allowed to stop at the prison gate. The Prison Service must develop new strategies to maximise the benefits it delivers to society. It needs to show, in short, that **prison pays**.

We believe that the future of prisons lies in a preoccupation with **quality, not ideology** – an approach that we have called *total prison management*. A *total regime* will achieve a positive impact on:

- *inmates*, by creating an environment which challenges them to change, and to take more responsibility for their lives and actions;
- *prison staff*, by placing greater value on their expertise, and their capacity to make more meaningful contributions in their work and
- *society*, by providing a heightened awareness of what prison is, and what it is doing.

HMP Wandsworth is used as a model. This is a prison which has undergone a remarkable turnaround in the last eight years. Once considered a 'breaking prison' for prisoners and staff, it now sets **consistently high standards** in all areas.

Breaking Out argues that lessons learned at Wandsworth provide a foundation on which to build **far-reaching change** across the whole prison system.

Regimes – the middle way

In the past, argument over prison regimes polarised between those favouring a 'hard' or a 'soft' approach. Prisons could either be liberal, but out of control, or disciplined, but de-humanising for inmates and staff. Wandsworth has pioneered a middle path, designing a regime that is focused, interactive and imaginative. A policy of 'zero tolerance' towards minor offences has been used to create a stable and positive environment, in which opportunities for individual responsibility and self-improvement have flourished.

Central to Wandsworth's regime is its *Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme*, which was introduced in April 1996 and goes far beyond incentive programmes found in other prisons. Each of Wandsworth's inmates receives regular feedback on his behaviour in all areas of prison life, as measured by a series of objective criteria. Three types of information are collected – *positive contributions* to the regime; *unacceptable behaviour* and any *failure to comply with sentence planning*. The procedure is transparent, leading to high levels of confidence amongst staff. Inmates have made favourable comparisons with other schemes in the Prison Service.

The results are remarkable. All significant indicators of inmate behaviour show marked improvement. Governor's reports, for example, are down by a third, and assaults on staff by up to two thirds. Similarly startling results have been achieved through a comprehensive strategy to tackle drug abuse. The combination of mandatory testing, supply restriction *and* treatment programmes has pushed the level of positive random drug tests to as low as 2%, compared to 24% in the wider prison population. The challenge now is to push this success story further.

Sentence management

Sentence management starts from the belief that *the whole of a prisoner's sentence should be aimed at preparing for his or her release*. This is a commendable theory, but one that has been hampered in practice by two factors. First, decisions have been made on the basis of poor quality information, leading to inadequate assessments. Second, this problem is compounded by the fact that progress is then only made through special treatment programmes, which are expensive and therefore offered to relatively few prisoners.

Wandsworth's approach to behavioural monitoring (along with complementary work at HMP Garth) offers a solution to both difficulties. It uses staff who *already* supervise prisoners to gather comprehensive, current information on each inmate. It is only a small step to use this information to identify *and* tackle behavioural and skill deficits in real-life situations. A prisoner with, say, a problem managing anger can be identified by his behaviour within the regime. He can then be directed towards a series of jobs which demand a steadily increasing ability to negotiate relationships under pressure.

Prison works

Sentence management aims to make inmates more responsible for their actions. This is frustrated by the fact that prison is a highly artificial – and in many ways sheltered – environment. Prisoners are part of the ultimate dependency culture. They do not pay bills or taxes. They do not pay their "debt to society" by compensating their victims. They are even a burden on their own families, who provide them with cash and belongings out of an often over-stretched budget.

Prisoners have one asset – their labour – but even this is under-used. Many do not work. In part, this is because schemes to provide employment in prisons have often been unsuccessful.

Prison managers have been asked to become entrepreneurs, with mixed results. A new way forward lies in encouraging each prison to develop conditions into which the private sector will want to locate. Businesses already have the management skills and the ability to maximise the potential of the prison workforce. Most importantly, the private sector will only pursue viable and profitable operations – ensuring new initiatives are grounded in the real world.

Once a prisoner is paid and employed by a private company, the balance of his or her life can be radically altered. A wage will allow a prisoner to pay taxes; contribute to accommodation and subsistence while in prison; give money to victim compensation schemes; provide support to his or her family; and pay for his or her own private cash allowance. It will also be possible for a long term prisoner to build up a financial cushion for release.

David Farrington of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology has demonstrated what new Labour intuitively understands – in work lies salvation. His research shows that it is the prisoner who finds stable employment on release who is least likely to re-offend. Inmates doing real work in prison are less likely to suffer gate fever and will have a greater chance of graduating into employment when released.

Total Prison Management

Prison cannot simply be a temporary dumping ground. It too, must be a place 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. The service needs to use the best management practice found in the private sector – including increased transparency, results-driven teamwork, information technology and imaginative extensions of core activities – to reinvent itself as a modern organisation. It should be dedicated to translating the equivalent of Total Quality Management into prisons – to creating a system of *Total Prison Management* which emphasises assessment, training and employment.

Such a programme will only be successful if there is a consistent attempt to *communicate* what is being done, and why, to both internal and external stakeholders. A new commitment will be needed by those who work the regime. Staff 'at the coal face' must be allowed to develop a sense of ownership of new objectives. Management must be sensitive to the pressures their staff are under, and work hard to foster successful, cohesive teams. This is a lot to ask – but promises a way of working which is ultimately less stressful (and therefore costly), as well as more dynamic and rewarding.

Those who work in the service are demoralised, in part, because they feel society does not understand what prison is like or appreciate their work. This is an unhealthy situation. It breeds defensiveness and helps create an introverted and institutional mind-set (what the Police know as "canteen culture"). While contradictory and exaggerated portrayals of prison life continue to flourish, resources are dedicated to firefighting, instead of being used to actively shape the debate.

It is time for a wake-up call. The Prison Service must accept what other modern organisations have learned – that it is not possible to sit back and *expect* the wider world to understand what you are doing. There must be new dialogue with key stakeholders – the public, judiciary and media. The aim should be to *inform* each group about what prisons are trying to achieve, but also to *listen* to what they expect from the Prison Service.

Prisons have been isolated for too long – ill at ease in their local communities and misunderstood by the wider society. It is time to let some light in.

Appendix one – where next?

Breaking Out offers a clear vision for the Prison Service, but this vision is more than Utopian. It translates into action. Experienced players and informed outsiders need to develop and take forward a raft of practical proposals.

Here are some of the ideas which need to be explored in more depth:

Creating responsible prisoners

- *Streamlining education* to focus on employment, not enjoyment.

- A concerted attempt to develop *private sector partnerships* – detailed discussion of this possibility with a major player in IT (an industry bedevilled by a low skills-base) indicates significant interest in, and potential resources for, the right approach.

- Better *bail information schemes* putting the onus on the individual to demonstrate in court that s/he need not be on remand.

- *Records of achievement*, acting as a passport to the outside world.

- *Job clubs* and *home finders* to encourage an active approach to searching for work and secure accommodation.

Pulling together

- Strategies for establishing more fruitful *dialogue between staff and management*.

- *Fund-raising for victim support* – each prison works towards a target, providing a focus for the whole institution (one prisoner in Wandsworth collected over £2000 from prisoners and staff for Dunblane). Across the entire system, substantial sums would be involved.

- A fast delivery consultancy drawing together *best practice*, key indicators and emerging trends from across the system.

Community duties

- *Outsiders using facilities*, as at Wandsworth where groups of disabled children are supervised in the gym by inmates – who themselves benefit most from the chance at responsibility.

- Regular *open days* inviting the (paying!) public and media to see what prison is really like.

- Exploring the potential for two way *contact and partnerships* with schools, councils and local groups.

- Building *better international links* with penal experts, sharing experience of how to imprison people well.

- A new *communication strategy* to help the Prison Service talk and listen to its key stakeholders.

Appendix two – biographical notes

Graham Clark joined the prison service in 1970, after a career in the Royal Navy and as a probation officer. He worked at Hewell Grange, Albany, Durham and Channings Wood, before being appointed Governor of Wandsworth in 1988. His tenure at Wandsworth has seen the prison undergo what the Prisons Inspectorate recently described as "something of a revolution." In recognition of these changes, he was awarded an OBE in last year's New Year's honours list.

John Pollock was an academic and researcher at Manchester University before joining the Department of the Environment as a senior social policy researcher. His research concentrates on the public understanding of complex issues. After the DoE, he worked in an innovative community care project for adults with learning difficulties and for the environmental education foundation, Living Earth. He is a co-founder of River Path Associates.

Simon Shepherd is a psychologist who originally specialised in treatment programmes for young offenders and others. After training staff in dealing with areas as diverse as sex offending, anger management and delinquency, he provided central oversight and supervision for the Prison Service's national treatment programmes. A board member at HMP Wandsworth responsible for prisoner monitoring and the prison's strategic planning, he lectures in Counselling Psychology at City University and Applied Criminological Psychology at London University.

David Steven has a widely-based publishing, editorial and policy background in the arts. He has run training workshops in schools, prisons and special needs centres in Britain and Europe with the theatre group Word and Action. After working as commissioning editor for an independent publisher, he acted as a policy consultant, advising the Lottery Promotion Company on the National Lottery and South West Arts on publishing policy. He is co-founder of River Path Associates.

River Path Associates was set up in February 1997 to provide fresh thinking on the complex issues of our time and suggest effective solutions. Its work is an eclectic blend – ranging from global affairs (for the Department for International Development and the World Bank), through science (for the Royal Society and the British Association), to football (for *When Saturday Comes*). Its network of associates are active in areas from politics, finance and geotechnology to advertising, business and criminology (via multimedia and PR).

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