

## **"Managerialism and Performance Management in the Public Sector " – the significance of language.**

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for this opportunity to contribute to the Perrie Lectures and also to extend a word of praise to the Committee which sustains the commitment to stimulate thinking, debate and dialogue at this Annual Event. There are all too few opportunities in a busy resource-conscious and target-driven working world to think more widely about prisons, to reflect on what they are for, to take stock of what is happening in them month-in, month-out and to spark new ideas with the potential to inspire and to make things better. Today is special for that reason alone.

As the first speaker – and conscious that you have contributors later today with vast experience of the Prison Service who have lived and worked through the high-water marks of the era of managerialism – I plan to do three things:

some scene-setting drawn from a wider context in the public sector and my recent reading in preparation for this lecture.

To offer personal thoughts and reflections based on my own experience of working in the public and voluntary sectors .

And finally to mention in a fairly brief way the work I was involved in with the Prison Service in the North-East\ Area as manager of the Restorative Prisons Project, and the learning we gained from exploring a set of ideas about restorative work in a prison setting without a set of prescribed targets as constraints upon us.

We should acknowledge from the outset that to want to make progress, to achieve improvements, to get better outcomes from one's efforts is a natural human ambition and a characteristic of the management task. It has been said that managers have been seeking sure-fire methods of boosting performance since Joshua took his senior officers on a bonding weekend learning to play the trumpet; and bookshop shelves bulge with thick tomes on the subject of performance management, with titles that are now along the lines of "Improving your Organisation the Genghis Khan way". My concern about shifts in language and the imagery that is conveyed stems substantially from my observation and experience of a change that had started in the late 1980s and has been accelerated with forceful intent in the past decade.

As a senior manager in the criminal justice system from 1980 onwards, I was familiar with the organizational world of objectives and priorities, of the requirement to draw up a statement of purpose and set out aims to be worked for over a 1, 3 or 5 year period, and of encouragement for appraisal and examination of methods of work with offenders that could be incorporated in individual, group-work or team plans....but words such as purpose, aims, and evaluation allowed for negotiated discretion, exercise of professional judgement and creativity, room to develop and justify innovation and experiment and they came to be seen as 'soft' and lacking in rigour. They were quite determinedly replaced by the language of performance management, target-setting and enforcement with imagery that is altogether more restrictive and explicitly about imposed control rather than promotion of professional self-discipline and taking personal responsibility for contributing to organizational development and achievement. It is striking to note how the Probation Service's interest in improving effectiveness came to be incorporated in the initiative entitled "What Works?". It originally had a question mark at the end of the phrase

– implying a spirit of enquiry, discovery and ongoing development and understanding of human behaviours –but it was quickly adopted as "What Works", without retaining the query. It was then used to define a set of centrally approved and required programmes of work to be used with groups of offenders following a standard assessment tool and numerical targets were set for so-called "throughput". That is how a process was set up for the Probation Service – but I am sure you can identify similar examples in your own setting at around the same time...particularly if there was a Home Office connection, although the trend was not unique to that Ministry.

So the past 10 years have brought a significant increase in the cadres of performance managers working to a varied range of job titles, and the rise to powerful pre-eminence of KPIs and performance targets, accompanied by ranks of monitors, inspectors and auditors in every area of the public sector. Inspection and monitoring is now a continuous process undertaken by people who are "other" than the practitioners trained to do the actual job. There is no gain-saying that some noteworthy improvements in performance and accountability have been achieved and have been given the headlines...but actually there has not been as much improvement as expected, new performance-related initiatives have increased in pace and complexity and league-tables have been introduced as another kind of goad. It seems to me that far from impressing or reassuring the public, the emphasis on action and toughness has actually produced a more sceptical and unconvinced public mood and what could have counted as useful gains have been squandered. More pseudo-scientific and obscure language and terminologies have produced perverse and contradictory consequences...we now have the incomprehensible Community Rehabilitation and Punishment Order on the statute book. (I do seriously wonder who has their ambition fired by being a CRAPO supervisor?) and meantime there is more not less fear of crime, even though overall levels of crime, including juvenile crime have shown some commendable reductions.

We have reached a stage where critics of managerialism and quantitative performance measurement can point to ways in which managers now make decisions not with the aim of providing the best, most relevant or sensitive-to-changing need service to local users i.e. their customers, the people who really need the best value from the organization, but make decisions which ensure that they hit their targets and avoid the censure or criticism of departmental superiors or visiting inspectors. Management by target can be very destructive and contradictory at the workplace or service-delivery point...and we heard an interesting example of this during the recent election campaign when a patient explained to Tony Blair that she had been unable to get an appointment at her convenience with her GP, but was required by the surgery to have one within 48 hours to comply with an NHS target. Gavin Lawrie – a consultant in performance management writing in The Times recently – claimed that there are examples in public services of people working at service delivery points simply ticking every box on the target scorecard, irrespective of what was really happening, to show that targets had been hit...or because in the course of their daily working experience the targets were viewed as irrelevant and time-wasting diversions. Does that ring any bells with your experience? what does it say about the culture of anxiety, sycophancy and utter cynicism that has come to stalk some aspects of organizational life and practice? Can we be content how little notice is taken of constructive criticism...and how little questioning of policy directives and interminable structural changes is actually being permitted – let alone encouraged? Why when I contemplate the 18 months since NOMS was announced do I have the image of the Emperor's New Clothes and find its language of metamorphosis and transformational human relations worthy of Humpty Dumpty...who could make words mean whatever he wanted them to. The very culture that has been created gets in the way of worthwhile debate and realization of good ideas ...because initiatives come along as

frequently as the proverbial London buses, which at least have a reasonable chance of reaching their destination.

I was struck by an article by Anna Coote of the Kings' Fund NHS think-tank in The Guardian. It referred to a report –published in late 2004 – on the challenges of "Finding out What Works" and basing policy and practice on evidence. The report found that policy outcomes...the things that really achieve a change for the better...not the detailed preoccupation with process that innumerable targets focus on...emerge in a much more random, unscientific manner than the rhetoric of evidence-based imperatives suggests. Apparently the report even asserts that some decisions taken on the basis of expert hunch and cumulative experience can produce perfectly satisfactory results...which is very worrying for the bean-counters. What is more it exposed serious, unresolved tensions between politicians, government officials and service directors, academic researchers and community-based service delivery units. They all claim to want to find out what works:

- but Ministers usually want quick wins.
- officials want to manage performance and meet targets and generate good sound-bites..
- researchers want to safeguard academic credibility in the conduct of evaluation.
- local staff want to get the resources and some positive support for the service they can offer to people coming in through the doors, whose expectations are being constantly raised and disappointed.

What emerges is a recipe for confusion, contradiction and conflict of interests at all levels; lack of ownership and cohesion inhibits progress. The public is obviously increasingly uncertain about all the new organizational dawns that keep being announced, and the interminable legislation – and we should not be too surprised by the scepticism that is voiced about whether improving mainstream services are actually getting better.

In a centrally-directed preoccupation with targets, some can at times achieve a level of absurdity. The Home Office 5 year plan includes the following drug-related targets:

to increase the proportion of heroin seized from 10% in 2003 to 16% in 2006, and of cocaine seized from 12% to 26% in the same period.

As Polly Toynbee has written "these figures are almost touchingly barmy" as the Home Office can have no idea what proportion of any available drug is being seized...an increase in seizures might reflect even greater availability on the streets. Could it be that such targets are not set by people who are familiar with the operational world of organizations and policy implementation? Do they work only in the realms of target-setting and boxes that need to be ticked and counted...and does a performance-related salary depend on getting ticks in place by a given date? Or meeting performance criteria which are distant from the realities of many people's working lives.

I recently chaired a conference on Domestic Violence and its impact on children and young people. We had an excellent contribution from a local Education Department coordinator of services for young children affected by domestic violence. She described a small primary school -

with about 100 children on the school roll – with a Womens' Refuge in its catchment area. In the course of one year recently the school had 37 receptions and 39 children left to go to other schools i.e. it had a high turnover for such a small school and staff group. She expressed great praise for the sensitive and supportive work being done by the staff with children and parents in crisis....but the OFSTED inspection report that year criticized the school's failure to improve the SATS results for 7 year-olds and to deliver on some of the objectives in the school plan. She didn't say whether they had dropped down a league table as well, but it must have been a somewhat demotivating experience for the staff; and it does raise a question about what a primary school is for ? Is it for young children's nurture, education and inclusion in a caring community – or is it more important to deliver targets and externally prescribed departmental requirements where failure might have the consequence of dispersal and exclusion of children in trouble because of the importance of public reputation. Surely a better balance has to be struck.

There is also the example of CONNEXIONS, the careers and youth support service launched in 2001, now going through uncertainty about its future arrangements and prolonged criticism for "leaning too far" towards the neediest youngsters i.e. those not in education, employment or training ( a group all-too-familiar in YOI populations). Yet it might be said that the operation of the service was skewed from the outset because the targets for performance were set for the specialist work of Connexions – to reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training by 10% over 2 years from November 2002. An unnamed spokesperson commented; "If you have a target set for you, then that becomes the measure of success or failure in performance. No goals were set for developing a broader career service". This serves as a good example of target distortion – equally familiar in other public services and summed up in the damning phrase that what gets measured gets done.

So it was with some pleasure that I picked up the very good Prison Service Journal issue of January 2005 which – to quote the editorial comment – emphasized the importance of providing space in which we can reflect not just on how we are doing things and how we can do them more efficiently and effectively, but also on what we are doing, why we are doing it and whether it is the right thing to do in public service delivery organizations working with our fellow-citizens and fellow human-beings. To weigh up, as Prof Andrew Coyle said in his recent Inaugural lecture in Prison Studies at Kings' College, London University, the consequences of a concentration on reducing potential for reoffending rather than increasing the potential for personal development and becoming a contributor to society – to be released from prison freed from label and stigma too. Erwin James' books "A Life Inside" and "The Home Stretch" are a telling and very straightforward commentary on this matter. He pinpoints how persistently punitive and retributive attitudes are an obstacle to development for many prisoners and cites prison locations in which education and teaching are not held in high regard in regime organization and priorities.....unless or until there is a basic skills target to be met. To quote him: "It is left to special people prepared to swim against the tide and who understand the power of self-discovery and creativity" to promote the marginal subjects like arts, music and education and enable at least some prisoners to find a voice and have the confidence to use it. James' account of his experience of long-term imprisonment is a powerful reminder that the route to desistance from crime and resettlement into a constructive, satisfying and valued alternative lifestyle is invariably a highly personal journey which can only to a limited extent be programmed by others. Punishment and retribution do not open the doors or provide the pathways, as was equally well described in case studies used by Shadd Maruna in his book "Making good: how ex-convicts reform their lives".

The Prison Service Journal also alerted me to Alison Liebling's recent work which explores the moral agenda around decency and the focus on Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MPQL), which seems an encouraging attempt to bridge the gap between the alleged woolliness of moral and quality perspectives and the political and managerial approaches that inflate the importance of the measurable; but any such shift must be backed by political will, committed organizational leadership and – I suggest – a lot of attention to effective communication with staff and what MPQL means in terms of their daily job in their workplace. Otherwise there is now the serious risk it will be experienced as yet another imposition that will be abandoned when the next initiative looms quickly over the horizon. We must surely know by now that "process re-engineering" and "promoting constructive discomfort", terms used to herald a drive for progressive change, have hardly proved themselves as rallying-calls for the many staff who do want to do a decent job – but they have generated cynicism to a corrosive level.

So to the Restorative Prisons Project. It was funded by the Northern Rock Foundation from 2000 – 2004, managed by ICPS and focused on the North-East Prison Service Area in partnership with other organizations such as Local Authorities, Inside Out Trust and local community and charitable organizations. It has been succeeded now in its work by the N.E. Restorative Community Partnership .Its aim was to explore a set of ideas, and it was about building the concept and language of restoration, responsibility, reconnection and inclusion into the world of prison work; this included seeing the prison as having a place in the community, networked with other services and regeneration activities around its location and building connections with the communities and services to which 99% of serving prisoners return – and where they face the core challenges of resettlement, and where they become part of the solution – or the problem – for Crime and Disorder strategies and Community Safety partnerships.

Basically we had 4 themes or pillars around which we built the project's work. 4 Ways in which we were trying to promote changes to the kind of place a prison is and the way it inter-connects with its surroundings and the communities it exists to serve:

to create a new structural relationship between the prison and the surrounding community with a continuity i.e. something that went beyond the history of occasional shared activities and individual enthusiasms.

To provide opportunities for prisoners to do work for the benefit of others, ranging from the chance to learn new, accreditable and transferable skills for those serving longer sentences, to at least some hours of purposeful activity for short-sentence people in local prisons – preferably doing work for a community or

a beneficiary likely to be known to them so that there was a focus for talk about what they were doing and why.

\*to raise awareness in practical ways among prisoners about victim-related issues....about the impact of crime on the lives of victims and the wider community.

\*to explore a new basis for resolving conflict in prisons, through use of mediation, conflict – resolution and apology exchange, rather than over-reliance on formal discipline, grievance and complaints procedures.

None of these were new ideas; there was no need to invent them or clothe them in obscure language to give them an innovatory edge. What was deeply impressive and encouraging was the enthusiasm and commitment with which they were taken on board, given meaning and translated into their work by prison staff at all grades – including Workshop Instructors, Industrial Managers, Resettlement Managers, Personal Officers, teachers etc – and with which they were received by Local Authority staff, Special School Heads, Youth Activity leaders, Wildlife Trusts and others who saw themselves as part of the benefiting community.

There were some clear objectives for all participants, and all were capable of evaluation:

for prisoners, objectives included the acquisition of skills, information and knowledge; the opportunity to enhance self-esteem and feel worthwhile; and the improvement of attitudes towards the community and their responsibilities within it. All these aims could in turn focus on better chances of resettlement and reintegration on release and provide chances to use new learning, attitudes or thinking-skills gained from other prison programmes.

For prisons, there was an increase in the availability of truly purposeful activities for some prisoners; positive use of prisoners' time which could be linked to skill acquisition and educational opportunities and an increased interaction with the community through doing work and receiving feedback, as well as achieving an increased understanding of what prison work is trying to achieve.

For communities there were obvious and tangible benefits such as the restoration work that was done for Albert Park in Middlesbrough and Saltwell Park in Gateshead. There was raised awareness of prisoners' capacity to contribute to the community as well as of the resettlement problems and challenges facing many of them on release. Most importantly there was a new focus for discussion and debate about the purposes and expectations of imprisonment and about prisoners and who they are – which raised the quality of such discussion above the pitiful level of ignorance and misinformation that often characterizes it.

The kind of measures available were:

for prisoners – an inventory of skills used or learned, simple measures of self-esteem, knowledge gained about community resources, questionnaires on attitude changes.

For prisons – records of time taken up by purposeful activity and its influence on sentence and resettlement plans, or even pre-release opportunities for some prisoners. Staff attitude surveys, questionnaires and records of attendance and sickness absence of those involved in the work. An inventory of increased community involvement and partnership work with local organizations.

For community groups a record of the volume of work done (costed at minimum wage levels) and the range of work with which prisons and prisoners can assist. Surveys of users and beneficiaries of restoration work e.g. the public survey undertaken in Albert Park by researchers from University of Teesside. Promotion of media coverage to highlight the positive benefits of the work and to facilitate focused discussion with local community groups.

The work done in and for Albert Park, Middlesbrough, and Saltwell Park, Gateshead, provided a concrete basis for developing a new relationship between Local Authorities and prisons. At some level there was awareness of the prisons serving the area and, of course, that people from

the locality were held in prisons not far away and would be returning but the level of detail about such matters is usually very low except in the most notorious cases. It is a fact that in 2003, 49000 of the adults sent to prison were there for six months or less – so their absence from the local community would be short and their return often problematic and largely unsupervised and unsupported. During the project's work, Local Authority representatives came to see the benefits for their responsibilities of closer working links with nearby prisons and the prisons could see the logic of a closer relationship. Prison staff involved often lived in the area and welcomed the chance to be actively involved in work with and for the community through their professional prison work. Prisoners who had been unmotivated by repetitive contract work – or bored because they had no work at all – showed real enthusiasm and interest in what they were doing, and often particularly welcomed doing something that family and friends could know about and even benefit from. Resettlement responsibilities include finding prisoners work to do on release, a place to live, social and health support. For this to be effective links with the local authority and community are invaluable.....and in turn Local Authorities need to take account of returning prisoners and recidivism patterns in their plans.

In July 2003 a major conference on building relationships between prisons and local government was organized by the project and Middlesbrough Council, with over 100 people attending to hear keynote speakers. In her contribution a representative from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"This is precisely the kind of project the ODPM supports and believes is the way to help achieve genuinely sustainable and inclusive communities with everyone in the community making a worthwhile contribution. A project such as this one shows that prisons harbour considerable talent that can benefit the whole community, both in the prisoners themselves and in the dedicated staff who work day-in day-out to ensure the smooth running of the estates, often against the odds. It also helps to show the wider public the genuine contribution prisoners can make to society and this in turn can help prisoners to feel they have not been totally rejected.

So it has value in allowing prisoners to make amends for the wrong they have done. It has value for prisoners' relationships with their families and others who see the good they can do – but above all, it has value in showing the whole community that prisoners are members of the community too and that it is worth making the effort to help them resettle there when they leave prison".

Following the Middlesbrough conference meetings and discussions with the Local Government Association led in February 2004 to LGA representatives meeting senior officials in the prison and probation services to discuss future collaborative working. From thereon the LGA put considerable resources into developing policy and practice about Local Authorities' responsibilities for a range of criminal justice matters and in February 2005 published "Going Straight: reducing re-offending in local communities".

There is much more to be said and to be developed from the project's work and its continuation in the North-East and other Prison Service Areas. It was certainly one of the most rewarding, stimulating and creative pieces of work I have been involved with; I recall deeply moving meetings and discussions with prisoners involved in the work who spoke of the meanings and the learning they found in it, what their families reactions were, and its impact on their thinking about their past and what they wanted for the future. The Area Managers and a number of Governors were good supporters, and I met talented Prison Service staff who frequently referred to their added job satisfaction, who valued their involvement in what they

saw as good sense, worthwhile ideas and relevant change. There were many accounts of improved interactions with prisoners doing work for the project, lower sickness absences, and fewer discipline problems – and positive new working links with "outside" communities and projects .From the community side there were invariably appreciative comments and expressions of gratitude for the work of prisoners...as well as all the astonishment at learning what prisons and prisoners are capable of doing .In all I can claim we achieved a positive and well-regarded set of outcomes that are worthy of much further consideration and development in work with many of those prisoners whose crimes do require them to spend a period in prison before they are back in the community.

Ann Mace