

PRISONS - YOUR MEETING WITH THE HOME SECRETARY

Your meeting on Wednesday 7 May could authorise progressive changes in the workings of prisons for the next twenty years, or condemn them to a continuation of the present archaic and corrupt system.

The Problem

A new report, requested by Leon, coming out this week highlights and expands all the problems that Governors, Home Officials and outside experts agree is a chronic (30 years old at least), expensive (even the Home Office can find savings of £50 million in the £640 million prison budget) and corrupt system (restrictive practices are little short of fraudulent).

Creaking loudest are:

- (a) The shift system - For example a shift may end at 1.00 pm and the next shift begin at 2.30 pm. Instead of moving the shifts together so they dovetail, it is common for a man to be brought in from a rest day to do a whole 8 hour shift in order to cover the gap!
- (b) Task lists - These are rigid and insensitive to the changes and pressures on prison life. These should be a useful tool for management, not a further excuse for restrictive practices.
- (c) Complementing - The inflexible system whereby manning levels are determined by management, again giving rise to huge commitment to unnecessary overtime levels.

(d) External duties - Mostly trips to court. Their malpractice here is as bad as anything in the worse days of Fleet Street. Prison officers come in from rest days to do often short trips to court and, with skulduggery such as making sure the pick-up van comes late, manage to claim a full shift of overtime.

Consequently, the prison officers work on average 16 hours overtime per week. They, the taxpayers and the prisoners suffer. At the same time, Home Office officials have frequently heard groans from the officers "whatever you do don't touch our overtime"! This lunacy must stop. Home Office are rightly incensed BUT they are in danger of forgetting that the bull-like approach will not win this one. This arm of public sector is (a) entrenched in its attitudes, (b) have, to their credit, held the line in a situation of grave overcrowding, (c) on the other hand is tainted with a number (maybe 10%) of officers who will pull the roof down if we don't use kid gloves, (examples of the conduct of this bad minority include drug dealing to prisoners, and being so militant that some are said to have left cell doors open when they worked to rule last week (an inquiry is in progress), and (d) has a union with monopoly power. (But note, Securicor keeps illegal immigrants in custody, formerly these were kept in Pentonville.)

#### Suggested Solutions

- (1) Putting prison officers on a new wage and time level that cuts out overtime. Home Office support this. This is difficult as it may reduce the Governors' ability to deal with a crisis and must be linked with an emergency routine to be invoked by the Governor.
- (2) Group working (this is discussed at page 36 of the report) and is recommended. This would allow a group of

officers to cover and be flexible for each other. This must have a fail safe against "group corruption".

(3) Privatised or contract out low security prisons. This is not in the report. I have had discussions with Corrections Corporation of USA which is backed by the City of London. This owns and runs various prisons in the USA which are alleged to:

- a. be much cheaper than the State - saving taxpayers' money;
- b. have guaranteed civil liberties which are better than the State sector, eg no overcrowding and brutal wardens can be sued;
- c. have resident public inspectors;
- d. be successful and popular, though there is further to go.

We recommend you encourage Douglas Hurd to look at private prisons. We have a splendid opportunity now to start with an experimental private prison at North Eye where prison officers walked out and the place is in ruin. Historically, Britain had private prisons (eg the Bishop of Ely). We could use the precedent of Securicor. They keep illegal immigrants in custody near Heathrow at Harmondsworth. Norway had just started its first private prison. In America, even the Catholic Church runs a prison!

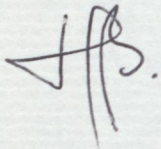
Politically, contracting out prisons will put some of the Left-wing into turmoil because we would be offering better civil liberties.

Industrially, it will be a resisted hook line and sinker by the POA, but this might prove a very handy bargaining lever against their monopoly position.

- (4) No strike agreements - yes, if possible, but avoid GCHQ round two?

Conclusion

We recommend new group working practices be introduced, together with a new pay and timetable régime which cuts out POA's ability to abuse overtime. We support moves towards contracting out low level security prisons, such as North Eye. Tactically, there could be scope for splitting the moderates and the militants, but we must publicly acknowledge the good work done by the majority if we condemn the abuses. What you should resist at all costs is a further major inquiry on abuses. We have just had a massive report from PA Management Consultants. The May Committee has also gone over this ground. Everyone knows the problem. There is nothing to be gained from postponing decisions.



HARTLEY BOOTH