

The terrible smell of failure

Labour has had nine years to sort out our prisons, but they are a disgrace to a civilised society



LIBBY PURVES

IT WAS ONLY a few lines of the 1997 Labour manifesto, but it was there. "We will take proper ministerial responsibility for the [prison] service and seek to ensure that regimes are constructive and require inmates to face up to their offending behaviour." In 2000, the director-general of the service, Martin Narey, laid out his own vision, which was humane and intelligent (this is the man who splendidly insisted on having a prison service float in that mad Jubilee procession, and rode down The Mall on it). He said that he would like to sell dim, crowded Victorian jails such as Brixton, Pentonville and Wormwood Scrubs to developers — the land is hugely valuable — and spend the money building prisons, "fit and decent for the year 2000", on cheaper land. At the time the chief inspector Sir David Ramsbotham was excoriating conditions for unsentenced remand prisoners. There was a hope that a new government would show a genuine sense of responsibility.

Fat chance. Nine years in, our prisons are in their worst crisis yet. They are full. There has been no visionary rebuilding programme, only a handful of small privatised jails. The old ones remain stuffed. Remand prisoners

account for more than half of prison suicides, whose numbers keep rising. Nine out of ten prisoners have a diagnosable mental health or substance abuse problem, often both, and psychiatric care is insufficient. Now the Home Secretary plans to use police cells (where will they put the ranting drunks now — back in the gutter?) and move serious criminals to open prisons while — according to a leaked memo — "accepting" the likelihood of absconders. There is talk of hurriedly converting a disused army camp.

Oh, for God's sake! This is not bad luck, it is glaring incompetence. I lose count of the warnings uttered by prison inspectors over the years, about both conditions and numbers. Perhaps that is precisely why the Government is trying to abolish the Prisons Inspectorate by merging it into a big amorphous body: to silence the embarrassing voices of chief inspectors. Ann Owers, the present one, says that it will muffle the "sharp focus and direct voice of prisons' inspection". Nice for the Home Secretary, but disastrous for the prisoners. Disastrous too, for their guards. Consider the officers now, not as figures of fun from *Porridge* but as vital public servants.

There is a point of view which says: "Overcrowded prisons? Pah, these are not holiday camps, let 'em rot." I cannot agree, particularly given the proportion of inmates who are mentally ill, addicted, illiterate, care-leavers or confused foreigners (one in eight) who wouldn't be here if the Government had kept control of the borders. Nor does it seem sensible to create conditions — even for the truly wicked — where rehabilitation is impossible. They will be out one day. However, the let-'em-rot philosophy is com-

mon enough to make it easy for governments to ignore prisons. So change the focus and think about prison officers: what we ask of them and how long they will go on putting up with it.

For them too, overcrowding and its consequence, endless moving around of prisoners, is awful. Worst of all when it leads to suicides. Brian Caton, of the Prison Officers' Association, has said: "Suicide is the acute symptom of overcrowding. People should be surprised we don't get more... Every one is a tragedy for someone, every one is a tragedy for the staff who have to deal with them. You never forget it. The smell... it stays with you. You think, have I failed?"

We ask a lot. The job description on the Home Office website mentions not only security checks, searches, supervision and restraint, but care for "rights and dignity, support for prisoners at risk of self-harm, taking an active part in rehabilitation, assessing and advising prisoners using your own experiences and integrity, and writing fair and perceptive reports". In other words, a good officer is both guard and mentor, a strong and kindly personality of intelligence and perception, able to engage with abominably difficult characters, control anger, win respect and convey the philosophy of a good life to the most unpromising subjects.

I have seen good work done by just such dedicated and thoughtful officers. Others, inevitably, do it grudging-

ly, cynically or brutally because they are ground down by the system and nobody seems to care (this year's pay rise was below inflation). Yet being a prison officer should be hugely respected, up near the top of the public service tree: it is harder than being a "work-life balance adviser", tougher than being a youth worker, more unremittingly taxing than even the police.

We should value them, recruit an ever higher quality of men and women, and give them space and scope. I am entirely in accord with those who want more community service, like the doughty Lord Chief Justice who tried it out in disguise. I would vote for proper mental units to take seriously disturbed cases out of prison. But there will always be prisons, and we are an affluent and supposedly humane society, and they ought to be a damn sight better. And no government has the guts to make it so.

Some days, the only way to cheer up is to spot gleams of light in the ill-tempered gloom. I am fond of the theatre groups — Only Connect, Pimlico Opera, London Shakespeare Workout — that bring buzz and self-respect to inmates. I revere the Prison Phoenix Trust, which teaches meditation, the Prisoners Education Trust funding distance learning, and every inventive local scheme. So accept, as a sweetener, the news that the chipmunks at Marwell Zoo have just had a swanky new enclosure built for them by inmates at the Guys Marsh young offender institute. Everyone is very proud of it: With luck, the lads who built it will soon be out of their own enclosure for good.

It's not much, but I thought you'd like to know.

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