

IRISH PROBATION JOURNAL Volume 5, September 2008

## **Address by Paul Goggins MP, Minister for Criminal Justice, at the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Centenary Conference, 'Probation – A Changing World. A Changing Role', Galgorm Manor, Ballymena, 13 March 2008**

Thanks to all of you and thanks to you Ronnie, I am sorry I missed the start of your speech but I think I got the important message, which was thanks for the new resources but we might be making a case for more in the future. Well that is, of course, always the way that things are. And Wendy, thank you for reminding me of my past as a social worker, but also this is not the first time that I have been the Minister for Prisons and Probation because I held that job, it was my first ministerial job, in the Home Office for two years. In fact, quietly, I can still claim the record to be the longest-serving Prisons and Probation Minister since Labour came to power in 1997. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing I will leave you to judge. And, of course, it is a role that David Hanson, who previously was the Criminal Justice Minister here, now holds in the new Ministry of Justice in London.

What I learned in those two years, two years where controversy was never far away for all kinds of reasons, was two things really about both the prisons and the probation service that everybody was agreed on. First of all we had to respect the different roles of the prison and probation services and their different history, but secondly that the case for more closely aligning the two services was absolutely beyond dispute. We have to make sure that we have a continuity of service between the probation and prison services.

So, having been a minister in the Home Office for both those services and seeing how they need to be more closely integrated, I was a bit surprised to say the least when I arrived here in May 2006 as Security Minister, responsible for the prison service, to find that I wasn't

responsible for the probation service, that that was done by a different minister. And as far as anybody can tell me, that has always been the case. Now we understand the reasons for that, the history particularly of the forty years of troubles in Northern Ireland, but I was delighted when we got devolution in May of last year, and we brought them together in the Northern Ireland Office in a slightly different way, that I was then the minister both for prisons and for the probation service. So we could move on from talking about single services and start to talk about an integrated system of offender management, which I think is the future for all of us.

Now the probation service has a huge and admirable and impressive track record and I was able last year to celebrate with many of you one hundred years of the probation service at an event at Hillsborough Castle. And at another event since then I was able to celebrate the twenty-five years' service that so many probation staff in Northern Ireland have put in and I really admire and congratulate all those who have put so many years of effort and service in.

The achievements have been enormous too, just in the recent past establishing the Victim Information Scheme, setting high standards for the supervision of offenders in Northern Ireland, rolling out the Electronic Information Management System (the wonderfully named EIMS system), all of these things are very impressive. And it is as well to remember that the prison service supervises on a day-by-day basis around 1,500 people at the moment. The probation service is monitoring and supervising already 4,000 every day in the community and that, of course, is a number that is going to increase.

I am particularly delighted that today we are focusing here on the changing role of the probation service because it is a role that is changing. I think that the role is well described in the new corporate plan and strategic priorities which are being launched today with an emphasis on partnership; partnership clearly and especially with other criminal justice agencies, the courts, the police, the prison service. There is also an emphasis on the key role that the probation service will play in assessing risk and protecting the public and the central aim, of course, of reducing offending and managing integrating offenders back into the community.

If the role of the probation service is changing, that reflects of course the changing context within which it is operating, in particular the introduction of the Criminal Justice Order that we have all debated and discussed at length over these last couple of years. But the truth is that

we are now almost at the point where that Criminal Justice Order will be a reality, i.e. we laid the order in parliament last week, we will debate it in committee in the first week of April and we are on track to have Royal Assent for that Criminal Justice Order by May.

So we are almost at the point of implementation and we know that the core aims of the Order are to enhance public protection, but also to rebalance the criminal justice system. So there will be an end to automatic 50% remission. The majority of offenders who are sentenced to custody will get a new form of custodial sentence, they will serve a custodial element of their sentence in full with no remission, but then when they are released they will be released on licence with conditions and under the supervision of the probation service. And, of course, the most serious and dangerous offenders will be placed either on life sentences or on indeterminate sentences where they can be held in prison for longer, where they won't be allowed out until it is safe for them to be allowed out. And again, when they are out, it will be under the supervision and monitoring of the probation service.

The other features of the Criminal Justice Order, which are about the rebalancing of the system, are the introduction of new rules in relation to curfews and the introduction for the first time in Northern Ireland of electronic tagging so that we can have tag on bail, as an alternative to remanding in custody, but we can also have an electronic tag as a condition of a community sentence to make them tougher and more credible.

We are also introducing the supervised activity order which will be an alternative to prison for fine defaulters and certainly the Secretary of State has indicated recently that he wants to see further and radical action in this particular area. It is such a waste that fine defaulters are sent to prison, just for a few days at a time, to no real effect other than the cost to the prison service that is involved. So we want to introduce new rules that will allow the deduction of money from wages and from benefits, and other systems to make sure that we don't have to send fine defaulters to prison. But the supervised activity order, which is in the Criminal Justice Order, will certainly be a good start.

So with all this additional responsibility, of course we have to make sure that the resources are available. We have to will the means if we wish to see the ends. And it has been a tight round of spending, the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, but I am delighted that over these last few weeks and months we have been able to put in place a good

budget for policing. I was able to announce, before Christmas, 400 additional prison places that will enable the prison service to cope with the additional numbers coming through. We put in place the funding to make sure that we get a new integrated college for the prison service, for the police service and for the fire and rescue service too.

But it is important as part of that overall provision that we build up the capacity of the probation service as well, and over the next three years I am able to confirm that £55 million will be allocated to the probation service. That means the service will be able to continue with its existing work, but there will be an additional £6 million to introduce the new criminal justice reforms. And what that means, is that, by 2010 to 2011, the probation service in Northern Ireland will have a budget of around £20 million, which is more than 20% of an increase compared with the current year. And what that means, of course, is additional front-line staff. At the moment the probation service has around 330 staff; that will go up to nearly 400, with 55 additional probation staff on the front line doing that very, very important work.

So what are the characteristics of the probation service in the future? First of all and very important, the service must have a victim focus. Much of the work of the probation service of course is done with offenders, but there needs to be a concern for the victim right at the heart of everything that the probation service does. And, of course, the probation service is responsible for the Victim Information Scheme, keeping victims and the families of victims informed about the supervision of offenders. And I am very pleased to see that, whilst victims are often very vulnerable because of their experience, there is a very high satisfaction rating indeed for that area of work.

The second characteristic is high quality programmes and interventions. I expect to see innovation in the kind of programmes that are run. Clearly, many of them will be intensive programmes, particularly with sex offenders. I think it is important that we build up the restorative principles within the programmes and the work that you do. Just an anecdote from my own constituency: I have a particular crime hotspot in one of the wards in my constituency, part of the problem is a lot of undergrowth has been allowed to get out of hand, bushes and so on, and lots of space for people to get up to mischief. The probation service has put a team of offenders doing unpaid work into that situation to cut everything back, to create an open space and to make the local community feel safer. And it seems to me that is the kind of practical way

in which the probation service can help offenders to put something back into the community against which they offended, and in a way that meets the approval of people and they understand that offenders are putting something back for the wrong they have done.

Within those programmes I also want to see a greater emphasis on education and training. It is very important that when you are, as a probation service, engaging with offenders that that opportunity is used to enhance education, skills and training so that people who have had an offending past could move on into work and have higher aspirations.

The third characteristic, and this touches on something that Ronnie was saying, is the need for cautious but confident risk management. The Criminal Justice Order will put the MASRAM arrangements on a statutory basis and it will mean the stricter supervision and management of offenders in the community, both on community sentences and after their release from prison. So I am very confident that overall this will mean stronger public protection.

We have no illusions, do we, about this? Many of these individuals are challenging, difficult individuals. Sometimes things will go wrong and it is very important therefore that we accept, as a service, that there will be closer public scrutiny of the work that the service does and a greater degree of accountability. And it is important in that context not to be naive, not to shy away from that interest, but to approach it with confidence and be prepared to explain what the service does and to see the wider context of public protection and to be able to help the community to understand that in more detail.

A fourth characteristic is the emphasis on partnership and this I can't emphasise enough, particularly of course partnership with the prison service, which will become more and more important. When it was put to me a few months ago that we needed to do something radically different in relation to the imprisonment of women in our system in Northern Ireland, I couldn't agree more. The present circumstances are better than we had in the past but they are not ideal and they need to be improved. But I am not prepared just to look at the provision of custody for women, in isolation from the rest of the provision that we have for women offenders. So, as part of the review that we are doing into new arrangements for women in prison, I want to look at what the community provision is like, what the hospital accommodation needs to be, so that we have an end-to-end review and a plan that comes out of that. And that partnership between prisons and probation right across the whole of the offending system will be really important in the future.

But it doesn't stop just at the prison service. A stronger partnership with all elements of the public service will, I think, be very important – with health, with education, with housing, with training, with the benefits agency – so that those people who are in the care and under the supervision of the probation service are enabled to move on from a life of crime to one where they keep the law and make a positive contribution to their own community. And I am delighted that the Executive have agreed to establish a ministerial group to oversee the co-ordination of all these different agencies in the effort to reduce offending.

The fifth characteristic, and again Ronnie touched on this in his remarks, will be that the modern probation service will be accountable to a local minister in a devolved administration, something I am strongly in favour of and I am pleased to see from the debates this week that it is something that all the parties in Northern Ireland are also in favour of. Of course there is the question of trust, there is the question of timing and that will require a lot of talk, a lot of dialogue for discussion in the coming period ahead. But that will be the conclusion, I am confident, of those further discussions. And quite right, it will be for a local minister, a locally run department that will oversee the probation service and the prison service. And I know Jeffery Donaldson, I don't think he is here yet, he is, I certainly want to pay tribute to Jeffrey in the work that he has done with the committee that he has overseen over these recent months, doing a lot of detailed work, making the way, preparing the way towards devolution. Without that commitment at this stage – and of course I was saying we need more conversation, we need more time, we need to make sure that the confidence is there – but a lot of detailed work has been done and I thank Jeffrey, and he is to be congratulated on his recent appointment as a minister.

So the probation service of the future will combine those old characteristics of advising, assisting and befriending offenders with the need to assess, to protect and to enforce orders and the supervision which the service is responsible for. In the end, of course, while ministers set the framework and allocate resources, while managers manage, it will be the probation staff on the front line of the service who manage offenders, who assess those risks, who use the interventions that are available to help and support offenders to get them to change their lives and in turn help to create a community with less crime, a community which is safer. And as the service develops in that way it can do so in the knowledge that it has the full support of government.