



Sean Lowry

Transitions in Irish Probation, 2005

This year sees some very significant goings and comings in the two probation services. Michael Donnellan took up his position as Director of the Probation and Welfare Service (PWS) on 5th September. Michael comes to the PWS, having been Director of Trinity House School in Lusk, Co. Dublin, and with a career in social work which has included a period (1994-1998) as Director of Finglas Children's Centre in Dublin and several years in social services in London. His new colleagues in the two services, North and South, wish him well in his new and challenging role. Earlier in the year, two probation stalwarts retired – Sean Lowry from the PWS and Brendan Fulton from PBNI, both after long and distinguished careers.

Sean Lowry's involvement in social work started while serving as a priest in the diocese of Down and Connor in the latter half of the 1960s. Part of his duties brought Sean into contact with services for children in residential care as well as adoption services. From those early days of his vocational career, Sean saw the benefit in approaching social problems and projects from a systemic point of view, rather than just reacting to individual need. Part of this response included the development of improved professional relationships with statutory children's welfare services. It also resulted in Sean being asked to do a social work course in Queen's University, Belfast. One of his fellow students on that programme was Briedge Gadd, who subsequently became a Chief Officer with PBNI. While completing the course, the 'troubles' started in Northern Ireland, and Sean returned to a chaotic situation in Belfast, where he was immediately assigned to work with families affected by the fallout from the worsening civil disorder at the time. This included assisting those who had been displaced from their homes to access housing and other services. At the systemic level, it included the establishment of the Co-ordinating Committee for Relief in Belfast. A key to the success of this effort was the 'bridging' ability that Sean brought to linking the large number of voluntary committees and organisations with those in the statutory sector, for which he received formal recognition from the British Government.

Notwithstanding the success of his work in Belfast, by early 1973, Sean had left the priesthood and moved to Dublin, where he considered how to develop a career in the social services. He had applied for a job in probation, although, having had some involvement in family welfare cases in the courts in the North, had felt that court based work was not for him. Nevertheless, he was offered just such a post and joined the Probation and Welfare Service in May 1973. Sean recalls that there were 39 probation officers in the PWS when he joined, although that time marked the beginning of a stage of significant development and growth for the Service. It also provided opportunities for advancement. Having been seconded in 1974-1975 to do the CQSW course in UCD, Sean was promoted to Senior Probation & Welfare Officer in 1977 and later to Assistant Principal in 1984. He was appointed Principal in July 2002. Over his

career with the PWS, Sean has had management responsibility for a wide range of operational and strategic areas of work. These have included various courts and prison teams, intensive probation projects, staff development, research & statistics and special schools.

Sean clearly has a lot to be proud of in his achievements, especially in his 'hallmark' approach of working in collaborative and consultative ways as far as possible. Even where difficult decisions had to be made, Sean sees the importance of how we arrive there and how different stakeholders are brought along that journey. At all stages and levels in his career, Sean has enjoyed being at the 'cutting edge' of service development, whether in Belfast in the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. working with 20-30 voluntary social service centres to develop effective services) or since then in Dublin (e.g. in developing the role of the PWS in relation to special schools or establishing the Bridge [intensive probation] project) and influencing and shaping service development.

Describing an 'abiding satisfaction' gained from working with the people in the PWS, and partner agencies, including those in the voluntary sector, Sean emphasises the need for the statutory and voluntary sectors to 'appreciate each other.' His new colleagues in the PWS were very welcoming when Sean joined, and he says he always found their commitment and conscientiousness exceptional. Involvement with people from diverse backgrounds and different walks of life has also been enriching, and many personal friendships have developed over the years and continue, North and South. Sean has always maintained strong personal and professional links with Northern Ireland and was very supportive, while head of the PWS, of the establishment of the Irish Probation Journal.

Sean had contemplated, for a couple of years before retirement, that he might get involved in work completely different from probation after he retired. However, given his wife Teresa's illness, and death in January this year, Sean did not really get to plan for that retirement, as he would otherwise have expected. Since retiring in February, he has been invited to bring his considerable experience and expertise to bear on a number of projects on behalf of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, including consultancy work in the fields of probation and as a member of the Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime. As we go to press, Sean has also accepted an invitation from the Minister to join the National Crime Council. He expresses a strong hope that the PWS can further develop, with increased clarity of purpose, its role and ability of 'getting people to rethink their criminality' and do this from a strong position within the criminal justice system.

Brendan Fulton joined the Probation Service in 1968 after graduating from Queens University. Probation Officers were then employed by the Ministry of Home Affairs and he recalls being issued with a briefcase engraved with the initials E.R. This was particularly useful given that his first posting was West Belfast. However in the following year his West Belfast area was divided to reflect the massive social and economic changes that had taken place in that part of the city. This was a very challenging period which saw thousands of people forced from their homes on both sides of this new divide. Brendan moved to Derry in 1971 and for the first time ever there were two members of staff (one Senior Probation Officer, one Probation Officer) covering the City. He then completed the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work

at the Northern Ireland Polytechnic, later to be known as the University of Ulster. Brendan joined the soccer team and served as a player and captain for many years as well as helping the Probation Service to two legendary Tavistock Cup successes.

After a further period in Antrim as a Probation Officer and Senior Probation Officer Brendan moved to Belfast Prison (AKA Crumlin Road) in 1981. This was an important period in the history of the prison and indeed the Probation Board. In the following year the Probation Board for Northern Ireland was established following a lengthy debate about whether Probation and Social Work should be one service, as had happened in Scotland. Meanwhile in prison Brendan was reacting to breakouts, super grass trials and segregation issues. There was still time for the nourishment of services for families of prisoners and the development of planned programme work with long term prisoners, especially life sentence prisoners. It was also the beginning of real inter disciplinary co-operation with agencies such as Psychiatry which sowed the seeds for current multi-agency arrangements, particularly in relation to high risk offenders.

In 1985 Brendan left prison to undertake special projects, such as planning the first day centre, before his appointment to Senior Management as Assistant Chief Probation Officer in 1986. He covered the full spectrum of Senior Management responsibilities including Greater Belfast, Rural Teams, Training Unit and, from 1995, Prisons. For the last 10 years Brendan has worked closely with the prison service and made a significant contribution to the high regard PBNI is held within the wider Criminal Justice area. He also guided the organisation in many complex areas of social policy and his contribution to addressing accommodation for offenders was recognised in a personal achievement award from the NI Council for the Homeless in 2005. Brendan was an active member of the National Association of Probation Officers and while the service underwent many changes he remained true to the core value of compassion for the less fortunate.

In addition to his work as a Probation Officer for nearly 37 years, Brendan was committed to his family and the Greater North Belfast Community during turbulent times. Brendan and Rosemary had four children and all of them played a part in the fledgling integrated education movement. Brendan never sought individual recognition for his efforts but was much happier as part of a team. At his leaving function in June 2005 tributes were paid from many different quarters but one consistent theme was his humanity. He was, and remains, a wonderful source of guidance and inspiration for all those employed in the Criminal Justice Area. Like his colleague Sean Lowry, he was held in positive regard by all those who worked with him and the editorial committee of the journal thought it was important to record, on behalf of both organisations, our appreciation of the dedication both men showed over the last four decades.

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Book Review

Maurice Vanstone (2004)
***Supervising Offenders in the Community:
A History of Probation Theory and Practice.***
Aldershot: Ashgate.

ISBN: 0-7546-4190-2, 208 pages, H/B, S£45.00.

This excellent book, which is an adaptation of a PhD thesis, uses what the author describes (pp.viii-ix, citing Thompson, 1978; 5-7) as 'evidence from the underside' using '... the analogy of mud on someone's shoes' to piece together a new and original account of the history of probation work, from the nineteenth century up to the present. Numerous histories of British probation have been written. Vanstone, in the preface (p.ix), suggests that his work does not deny 'the validity of previous accounts... Rather, it is an attempt to tell the full story.' In that aim, he succeeds in significant measure. In fact, Vanstone brings a freshness to the accepted (and indeed respected) accounts of commentators such as McWilliams and others, and adds further layers of understanding to them, while exposing an increased level of complexity and nuance to the previously received history. At the same time, his historical analysis never lowers its standards of scholarly objectivity, which are applied even-handedly throughout. The development of probation practice and its struggle for professional acceptance are discussed through the various stages of the hundred years of probation's development, right up to consideration of 'What Works?' and the 'rise to dominance of effective practice.' Although primarily focused on the British experience, some comparison with the USA is made.

As the centenary of the founding 1907 probation legislation approaches, this is a timely review, in the deepest sense, of the history of probation in these islands. It is not only a history of the organisation of the service per se, but in addition traces the development of underlying ideologies, values, principles and methods of practice. This publication is one in the 'Welfare and Society' series from the University of Wales Swansea, School of Social Sciences, in conjunction with Ashgate. Concluding that those of us working in probation have now arrived 'back to where we started,' Vanstone (pp.157-158) draws out some interesting lessons, including that:

'...probation practice... has survived largely because of faith: faith that it was justified morally, helpful, welcomed by its recipients and effective in reducing offending... It has undergone a number of transformations: ... Those changes have made the Service vulnerable to diverse influences... [but] the most consistent factor amidst the conflict and change has been a focus on the individual as the main target of influence... the individual offender has been the object of help conditional upon submission to official authority and control.'

Vanstone goes on to point out (pp.159-160) that probation 'does know how to "manage" offenders in the community but by offering tangible help to deal with problems associated with offending rather than unthinking control' and that the service needs self-belief now more than ever, to progress further, with a 'commitment to effectiveness in its fullest sense.'