Probation Practice at the End of the Troubles: Reflections from a Distance

Brian Stout*

Summary: This paper reflects on the author’s experience as a Probation Officer with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland in the 1990s, before and after the ceasefires and Good Friday Agreement, with reference to his varied experiences since then as a social work and criminal justice academic in South Africa, England and, now, Australia. It argues that although the practice setting was atypical and quite distinct from the lived experience of current students and practitioners in other places, observations from practising probation work in a civil conflict context have a lot to contribute to the learning of current students, practitioners and organisations. The paper considers the themes of restorative justice and desistance as well as occupational culture and community links. It suggests that reflections on practice in Northern Ireland might make a wider contribution to debates about the nature of probation practice and work with offenders.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, probation, offenders, supervision, probation practice, occupational culture, integration, desistance, social work, restorative justice, community, edgework.