

Probation Identity event, Gravesend 12 October 2018

Andrew Bridges' introduction:

I notice that a number of you here will be able to remember the Probation world at the turn of this century. So let me open this session by taking you back to early 2001, when under the then Labour Government a venerable public service organisation not only changed its structure but also gave itself a new name. Its staff and indeed the wider general public were outraged - so, facing continued derision from many quarters in 2002, the company directors dropped the new name of Consignia, and went back to calling their outfit the Royal Mail.

Under the same Labour Government the year 2001 also saw the change from 54 separate Probation Services to a single new National Probation Service, but it had only been late on in the process, in 2000, that the Home Secretary Jack Straw had reversed the earlier decision that the new organisation was going to be called the Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service.

At the time the organisation ACOP [Association of Chief Officers of Probation] was hosting in London a conference for Probation representatives from all over the world, and I personally credit Jack Straw with realising it wouldn't look good for the host country to be the one abandoning a label that had worldwide recognition.

But the then 'New Labour' policy drive was still to move on from something that was perceived as old-fashioned, and to 'rebrand' each change as something new and in keeping with Labour's mantra of "Tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime". So the early years of this century still saw the word Probation disappear from the name of Court Orders, and increasingly from the titles of both managers and many practitioners too.

After NOMS, the National Offender Management Service, was created – with, in my view, the very best of intentions initially – I was often asked if I as Chief Inspector of Probation would now be changing the name of the Inspectorate, and I would say No.

My main reasoning was that I did not want our Inspectorate to be legally trapped into being one that only inspected a named organisation. Just as HMI Prisons inspected prisons, whoever ran them, I was sure that in the future it would be necessary to ensure that our own Inspectorate was enabled to inspect Probation work, whoever was owning it or running it.

And of course Probation was a 'plain language' word that almost everyone in the wider world recognises (even if they don't know much about it), so I saw real value in using it as the generic term for the work we were inspecting.

Indeed, as each new Minister for Prisons and Probation started in post I would make a point in my introductory meeting with him or her that was designed to head them off from any new idea of rebranding the work being done - - even though they might be considering new ownership structures for it, as they often were.

I would point to an analogy between the word Probation and the old British Rail logo, the double-arrow in white on a red background. From 1965 to 1996 it had been the logo of the single specific public service organisation British Rail; but since 1996 it has led a continued life as the generic symbol for the whole national rail system, and is seen everywhere on road traffic signs to indicate where to find a nearby railway station. Its broad meaning has recognisably continued, even though its specific meaning has evolved somewhat.

I would then put to the Minister that 'Probation the label' needed to be retained for similar reasons - that people broadly knew what it meant, but that its meaning could evolve, as the British Rail logo had evolved. And this prevented the need for inventing clumsy new offputting language for relabelling the job.

Nevertheless, despite my efforts, the Probation label only just survived during the brief era of Probation Trusts. It was someone else who pointed out to me in about 2010 that I was apparently the only senior person in the country with Probation still in my own personal job title.

From that point the Probation identity has at least revived a little, with the reborn National Probation Service and in the relabelling of NOMS to HMPPS [Her Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service], but to my personal displeasure it has been specifically prohibited for the poor horribly-named CRCs to call themselves by any other name than CRC [Community Rehabilitation Company].

And of course the term Probation was removed from all work with under-18s some 20-plus years ago. Youth Offending work has its differences from adult Probation work, because of the childcare responsibilities, but is it so different that it should not be recognised as being part of the same 'family' of work?

On a related theme, Community Service / Community Punishment / Unpaid Work / Community Payback has over the years sometimes been marketed as very much part of the Probation family, and sometimes explicitly as being very separate from it.

And, again, similarly with offending-related work by Prisons staff in prisons, and with Electronic Monitoring in the community – do they count as being part of Probation work?

So, therefore, what about the future? You'll have gathered that in my view we certainly need to retain the Probation branding as an identity, but I also recognise that the specific meaning of that branding will continue to need to evolve.

After all, "Probation" originally meant in law a disposal that was "instead of a sentence" – from the Latin "probatio", a "period of testing", and therefore in law it was originally a new form of the old 'judicial reprieve'. Probation only became a sentence in its own right after the 1991 Criminal Justice Act.

In short, the specific meaning, or meanings, of Probation have evolved over time already, and also over locations across the world – which I haven't gone into today - and finally also in terms of what work is included under the Probation heading.

I imagine that in today's attendance there are few here who want to ditch the Probation badge altogether – though please tell us if you think we should! – and I expect that most here are keen to retain it. But as I've just outlined, the word Probation has changed its meaning in many ways at various times already, and I would imagine that there may be a range of views here now about what the Probation identity might mean now, and perhaps how it should evolve in the future.

Obviously I have my own views about that, but today I've mainly come to listen – listen to those who do the job now if possible. Would anyone like to start us off with their own view about what Probation means now, if anything, and what you hope it might mean in the future?

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