

## **My Probation Moments from the 1970s:**

(Andrew Bridges, HM Chief Inspector of Probation)

**1972:** It's my last year at university, and I'm thinking: "What about the Probation Service?" To enquire I visit the local Probation Office (York) and the bluff SPO there has two important pieces of advice for me: 1) "Wear a suit for the interview", and 2) "In this job you get paid the same in Torquay as you do in Bradford". Perhaps because the Home Office is trying to encourage graduates into the Service at that time I get in despite not wearing a suit ...

**1973:** On the 2 year Diploma in Social Work course at the University of Leicester, we are lectured by the already-venerable Mark Monger. He describes in graphic detail a horrendous crisis he had had to deal with on office duty years previously in his first ever week as a new student, then looks up and tells us all that with all his subsequent study, training and experience he still doesn't know now what he should have done on that occasion.

**1974:** Lively debates, mostly ideological. Many argue that probation officers cannot do both care and control, and should not "become screws on wheels." Also it's the radical position to argue against the use of the term "client" because it is inaccurate and patronising – years later the radical position becomes to insist on retaining "clients".

**1975:** The work is varied. My last student placement task is a Divorce Court Welfare case where both parents have new partners, and both want custody of all four children, and the case eventually goes to a 3-day contested hearing. One of my first pieces of work as a newly qualified Probation Officer in Swindon is an Application for Consent to Marry. I inherit a Probationer aged 17 who at his first interview looks at the Order and observes "It says here that I have to come and see you any time you say, but there's nothing here about having to *talk* to you." This reinforces my view that with Probation, contact is compulsory but what you talk about is voluntary, an approach that becomes much harder to sustain 20 years later.

**1976:** We learn that the research results on Intensive Probation in London have been disappointing: Intensive Probation is no more beneficial than normal Probation, and with first or second time offenders it can even be counter-productive. This is extremely disheartening (and it is probably fortunate that at the time I never hear about the so called "Nothing Works" findings from Martinson in America).

**1977:** Our Chief Probation Officer is Lawrence Frayne, an utterly outstanding social work supervisor, and once every two years you spend a whole day with him discussing your work. A memorably uplifting learning experience for me, leaving me reflecting for a long time afterwards "How did he do that?"

**1978:** A curiosity in the light of societal changes since then, but I swear this is true: Lawrence issues all POs in Wiltshire a statutory instruction that it is unacceptable to forbid a 'client' to smoke in your office during interview, essentially because we should show consideration to the 'client's' needs.

**1979:** Swindon is an expanding new town and the workload demands are great. I have 60+ cases, plus c130 social inquiry reports per year – but instead of National Standards each officer sets their own ‘standards’. One of my Probationers brings a friend in with her once and says “What I want to know is: Why do I have to come and see you every week, when my friend Angie here never has to see her Probation Officer at all?”

**1980:** In our team we radically organise ourselves into a report writer and court duty officer (me) and a groupwork and supervision group (my colleagues). Hence we get to entertain Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw in our tearoom when he visits Wiltshire Probation Service.

Other memories of main-grade work in Swindon – the sheer quantity of which I experience as an exhausting relentless treadmill of reports and cases for much of the time:

- A Magistrates Court run with an iron fist by the Clerk, and a Crown Court with a singularly punitive judge sitting regularly. With no more than a handful of exceptions in six years, I start all non-custodial social inquiry reports with a home visit, usually in the evening, and a ‘non-report’ is virtually unheard of – I know that if the Court thinks that a defendant is failing to co-operate with the Probation Service he or she will be remanded in custody for 3 weeks. Thus once I do a total of seven home visits to a delinquent young mother so that the Court will get its report at the scheduled hearing.
- An outstandingly good Community Service scheme: brilliantly constructive, creative and entrepreneurial in its work placements, at the same time as successfully operating draconian enforcement – someone who fails to report for work at 9.00 am on a Saturday is prosecuted, sentenced and in Bristol Prison by the following Friday afternoon.
- A mother calling up the stairs after opening the door to me “It’s all right - it’s only the Probation Officer ...”
- Conducting interviews in living rooms, in my early days in competition with the TV, until I decide that drastic action is needed. I later learn that I have finally achieved something as a Probation Officer when a colleague reports back to me about a case where I had done a report about a year previously – the mother told her “Oh we remember Mr Bridges all right – he made us turn the telly off!”

AMB  
May 2007