This chapter will consider how socialist principles can guide practice in a way which is helpful to the lives and futures of prisoners, given the present realities of the prison system. Previous accounts have sought to demonstrate how social work in prisons can be creative against the odds, and that stress and ambiguity of role can be turned to effective advantage (Pratt, 1975; Smith, 1979). Little attempt has been made to develop a progressive framework for action, congruent with a radical analysis of the struggle for social justice. The issue has been both helpfully highlighted and simultaneously fudged by the debate within NAPO about the continued secondment of probation officers to work in penal establishments. However I do not wish to concentrate narrowly on that concern. My own view, argued elsewhere (Stone, 1982), is that NAPO policy favouring withdrawal from secondment is ultimately correct. I believe that the views presented here sustain and inform that conclusion and move beyond that debate, but also offer some pointers within the present division of labour.

More urgently, we need to defend and develop our work, however structured, as a social service to prisoners, in the face of current Home Office proposals:

Sufficient resources should be allocated to through-care to enable the service’s statutory obligations to be discharged ... Beyond that, social work for offenders released from custody, though important in itself, can only command the priority which is consistent with the main objective of implementing non-custodial measures. (Home Office, 1984, p.5)

This statement is ominous and could further weaken the already fragile nature of voluntary after-care. The Home
Office do not see after-care as making a sufficient contribution to their chosen priorities for the probation service – the prevention of offending and the enforcement of law (Stone, 1984). Even David Haxby’s (1978, p.260) vision of a ‘community correctional service’ sees a justification for after-care as a straightforward social service which can act as ‘a form of positive discrimination in favour of a group of clients who, as a result of their custodial experience, are socially disadvantaged and stigmatised’. The gap between vague and worthy rhetoric and actual service delivery has been a shaming default (Walker and Beaumont, 1981). This limited service is now being justified and rationalised in various management strategies, which anticipate the Home Office proposals and give reduced workload weighting and resources to after-care. We may be better able to resist this decline and relocate prison-based work as a central concern and commitment of the probation service if we re-examine the politics and function of imprisonment.

An analysis of prison

Following a class-based analysis Mike Fitzgerald (1977, p.259) has starkly described imprisonment as ‘one of the most visible symbols of the all-embracing hegemony established by the ruling class in a capitalist society’. Put more mildly: ‘There is substantial evidence that the prison system contributes to division in society in that there is a differential liability between particular social classes to suffer imprisonment at all; and if they do suffer it, to the ways in which they do so’ (Morris, 1978, p.86). It is common wisdom to acknowledge the historical role of the prison ‘to confine and discipline the poor, the unemployed, the unemployable, the socially disadvantaged and the socially inept’ (Carlen, 1983a, p.209). Prison essentially draws its population from the unproductive working class, who are processed and recycled in a political climate of inertia, irresponsibility and ignorance. John McCarthy (1981, p.145), while a prison governor, described the persisting lack of change as a ‘process of collusion, not only among those who work inside prisons but also between society and the prison system which maintains a “quiet socie-