5
Adapting to the End of ‘Treatment’

Rehabilitation, penal policy and the ‘correctional apparatus’ in the 1980s

By late 1970s, the correctional aspirations of the penal system had been seriously undermined, leaving something of a lacuna in penal policy where ideas about rehabilitation used to be. The collapse of the treatment model also created problems of legitimacy for much of the ‘correctional apparatus’, the supposed rehabilitative potential of which had formerly justified its existence. For those parts of the penal system which had grown up on the foundations of rehabilitative optimism, and which had been most closely associated with the delivery of rehabilitative ‘treatment’, the future was far from certain. In 1978 the then head of the Home Office Research Unit expressed his own concerns as follows:

penological research carried out in the course of the last twenty years or so suggests that penal ‘treatments’, as we significantly describe them, do not have any reformative effect whatever other effects they may have. The dilemma is that a considerable investment has been made in various measures and services, of which the most obvious examples are custodial institutions for young adult offenders and probation and after-care services in the community for a wide variety of offenders. Are these resources simply to be abandoned on the basis of the accumulated research evidence? (Croft, 1978, p. 4)

Whilst the abandonment of the more overtly correctional or treatment-oriented parts of the system may not have been a realistic option, they nonetheless faced a crisis of identity, and the challenge to find and articulate a realistic and acceptable purpose loomed large.
The prison service
As we saw in Chapter 3, by the close of the nineteenth century prisons were increasingly being understood in terms of their reformative potential; but they were not initially conceived as instruments of rehabilitation. Thus, whilst the discrediting of ‘treatment’ did seem to suggest a re-think of prison’s official aims, and arguably did result in a crisis of identity and morale for some prison staff (King and Elliott, 1978), it did not by itself result in a questioning of the legitimacy of prisons per se.

Nonetheless, the 1970s had been a particularly turbulent decade for the prison service, and there is no doubt that by the end of that decade it faced a crisis of legitimacy. Not only had its reformative efforts been exposed as ineffective, but a spiralling prison population had meant the housing of prisoners in increasingly squalid conditions, an increase in the number and seriousness of prison disturbances, and an escalation of industrial action (King and Morgan, 1980). This state of affairs led to the establishment, in 1978, of the May Committee. Although assembled primarily to head off the industrial relations crisis, the Committee quickly came to the conclusion that it would be sensible to go beyond its ‘official’ remit and address the contemporary purposes of prison.

As King and Morgan (1980) have explained, the official purposes of prison were, by this time, somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, there was an acknowledgement that the new generation of training prisons had not brought any dramatic breakthroughs in respect of effectiveness; but on the other there seemed to be a reluctance to accept that the quest for correctional outcomes had failed. From the mid-1960s Prison Rule Number 1 had stated that ‘The purpose of the training and treatment of convicted prisoners shall be to encourage and assist them to lead a good and useful life’ (Home Office, 1964, quoted in King and Morgan, 1980, p. 14), but there had, by the end of the 1960s, already been an official distancing from this overarching (and ambitious) aim, in favour of an objective of ‘humane containment’ (Home Office, 1969). Thanks to a number of high-profile escapes, the late 1960s had also seen a re-emphasis on physical security, articulated in two official reports (Home Office, 1966; Advisory Council on the Penal System, 1968). Further, by the late 1960s, only around half of all prisoners were actually being transferred from local to training prisons in line with the ‘treatment and training’ philosophy, which, for King and Morgan, illustrates the ambivalence of the prison service in respect of its overarching purpose.

The May Committee formally acknowledged that in the context of imprisonment ‘the rhetoric of “treatment and training” had had its day