It is December 16th, 1997. I think of the imprisoned mothers who, because they are in gaol for a relatively minor crime, won’t be with their children this Christmas. I think, too, of the young girls who have already spent most of their childhoods in institutions, and who will this year be locked up in a prison cell for much of Christmas Day.

Last week the government initiated legislation for a reduction in the welfare benefits of single parents. Yesterday, I received a communication from the Prison Reform Trust asking for a subscription to help fund an ‘independent inquiry’ into women’s imprisonment. This morning a researcher from Probation phoned for advice on how to investigate the needs of women newly released from gaol. Bit by bit the welfare state is being dismantled. Year by year more and more women are being sent to prison. (There may not be a connection, though much research suggests that there is.) The reports and books detailing the waste of women’s imprisonment pile higher and higher. To no effect. There must be an alternative. (Author’s diary, 16 December 1997)

The women’s system has no management strategy. Governors are nervy about women’s prisons. There is no structure and strategy on which they can hold. Men or women working in the female establishments are not highly regarded. Nobody on the present prison Board has knowledge of women prisoners.

The Prison Service is used by Society as a sump and has no answers of its own. There is no analysis of the resources needed to run it properly. It is a myth that it is about crisis and only about crisis. The problem is that the Department only knows how to play it on the back foot. If it hasn’t a crisis, it has to create one. It’s only in crisis that it feels alive. It needs to be in a healthy state but the Prison Service acts out the disorder of the client. (Senior Official in the Home Office)
This chapter discusses three possible futures for women’s imprisonment. On the basis of the research findings presented and the arguments made in the previous pages, the critical thrust is predicated upon two assumptions: that prison does not work; and that the social meanings and jurisprudential implications of women’s imprisonment are significantly different to those of men’s. The chapter is therefore divided into three sections, subtitled as follows: (1) Prison does not work; (2) Women’s imprisonment – the jurisprudential questions; and (3) The futures of women’s imprisonment.

PRISON DOES NOT WORK

Prison is obviously a destructive experience. Therefore the best the regimes can do is try to ameliorate the worst effects. Despite all this ‘prison works’ bollocks that we’ve had around for the last few years, prison is basically a destroyer. I mean, it [prison works] is a total lie, and to a gullible public who knows nothing about prisons, it just feeds prejudice. (Senior Official in the Home Office)

There are not many people at headquarters who have actually worked in a women’s prison, and there are even fewer who know anything at all about a women’s open prison. So, we’re on a hiding to nothing really. (Governor No 4 – male)

I think that a lot of public opinion is dictated by the government – you know: ‘Lock them up and lose the key’. But it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. It’s all very well saying that probation is a soft option, but, if prison’s not working, you’ve got to try the alternatives. (Prison Officer 1 – female)

We’ve got a thankless job, because we come to work and we’re just holding people. It’s like saying, ‘Let’s waste a year of somebody’s life’. Say they get a two year sentence; they’re either in the sewing shop or on a basic education course – we only run basic education here. They’ll go out and they’ll be put back in the same environment, knowing that they can’t get a job because they’ve been in prison. I really can totally understand why they go back to crime. I know it’s a terrible thing for a prison officer to say, but I really do understand