

## COMMENT / ARTICLE

### **“A GOOD OFFICER”**

At HMP Birmingham there is a counter-revolution taking place. The old guard has eagerly anticipated returning to the “good ole days” of Her Majesty’s Prison Service after being forced into a brief dalliance with privatisation. But how recognisable is the Prison Service now to a veteran of the past? Is a good officer then a good officer now?

Frameworks and directives. Procedures and accountability. The contemporary custodial officer adheres to flow charts of instructions or else there is an outcry of failed expectations or lack of respect. Initiative is encouraged but in reality an officer’s routine appears so formulaised that the job looks almost programmable. So are living and breathing officers with sentiments and passion for the job essential, or should we start considering a future with humanoid officers, using Artificial Intelligence, to control a prison population monitored by sensors and high tech surveillance?

Birmingham was the first public sector prison to be placed into privatisation and the HMIP report that pre-empted the reversal of that decision hinted blame on an element of staff. Certainly, by submitting to conditioning, officers as unscrupulous as the criminals they lock up undermined the hard-work of the professionals. What was needed was a governor just as prepared to walk officers to the gate, as he was prepared to ship out unruly residents.

Some say G4S are in the “business” of employing officers whereas the Prison Service provides public servants. The difference may lie in recruitment. Some “private” officers would struggle to pass the physical element of the HMP process, never-mind the more intensive psychological scrutiny. The Service also believes that after internship an officer should be mentored, rather than thrown in the deep end and left to tread water whilst the sharks circle. Conversely G4S officers at Oakwood preside over a commended prison, but might this be because these officers buy-in to an established system of peer led involvement? A realisation that interaction with residents impacts positively on their rehabilitation.

It’s a fine balance. A recruit enhanced with life experience may have learnt to use discretion, yet still manage to complement colleagues in providing consistency and continuity. Certain of their values but not insistent on inflicting them on others, they possess an ability to influence into more constructive reasoning. They help redirect men, who for whatever reason have taken a wrong turn, as if they accept that for some quirk of fate it could have been them. In addition to challenging poor behaviour they challenge men to use their time gainfully, and the truth is the majority of prisoners appreciate those officers that treat them with decency and respect. After all, how can they gain the self-respect they needed to desist from crime if not shown what respect looks like? Officers that truly believe in rehabilitation mentally erase the line that separates them and us.

So yes, if the job were just about containment then hypothetically robots could be the future. However the need for human endeavour means the goodwill of man is irreplaceable.

