

## CRAPS dropped

Recently the Home Office announced that our long established and highly respected Probation Service was to be renamed. What they came up with was the Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service, which hardly trips off the tongue. Few thought the change a good idea, especially when it was pointed out that the inevitable (if mistaken) acronym would be CRAPS. There would also be everlasting doubt on the part of intelligent crappees about whether "community" governed "rehabilitation" as well as "punishment". This type of phrase is a source of ambiguity which is very well known - except apparently to some Home Office officials. (Actually it was meant to govern both.)

Despite appearances, there was behind this rather obvious piece of Home Office silliness some good reasoning (or what New Labour likes to call joined-up thinking). A consultation paper "Joining Forces to Protect the Public", issued in August 1998, began the process. The usual sort of ponderous official wit behind the title of this paper rose from the fact that it envisaged that certain forces, such as police forces and probation services (not forces, but never mind) might be joined together so as better to protect the long-suffering public. The paper alleged that a series of Acts of Parliament have merely served to consolidate an outdated reflection [how do you consolidate a reflection?] of a service that has been engaged in change and modernisation for many years. Legislation, it went on, still directs probation officers to "advise, assist and befriend" offenders". This phrase, it alleged, is completely out of line with modern reality. A pity that. I always thought it rather a good phrase.

The consultation paper led to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, introduced in the Commons on 15 March. *Part I* creates new probation and family services; *Part II* sets up a system to prevent "unsuitable" people from working with children (how common that useful adjective has become). *Part III* deals with community orders, including greater use of electronic monitoring, and introduces new powers for the compulsory drug testing of alleged offenders; *Part IV* introduces a new power to allow the police access to Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) driver records and increases the penalty for parents who fail to ensure that their children attend school regularly. I have space only for a few details of the probation arrangements.

The consultation paper proposed various ways in which the prison and probation services could work together to improve protection of the public and reduce reoffending. As a result of the consultation process the Home Secretary, Mr Jack Straw MP, has decided that the two services should not combine, but should retain their separate identities while using complementary methods to achieve these common goals. No doubt Parliament will confirm him in that and other relevant decisions, but the official explanatory memorandum on the Bill is wrong to assume that it will. The House of Lords might insist on contrary views.

The Home Secretary thinks existing arrangements under the Probation Service Act 1993, which provides for 54 separate probation services, are not working efficiently, and that the probation service's responsibility for Family Court work does not fit well with its core aim. Accordingly the Bill creates a unified probation service for England and Wales, which will be directly accountable to the Home Secretary. It will have a structure based on 42 local areas, each with a board composed of representatives of the local community who understand the needs of their people. The boundaries of these areas will match those of police forces, a step towards the Government's aim of improving efficiency by creating common boundaries across all agencies in the criminal justice system. The Children And Family Court Advisory

and Support Service (CAFCASS), also created by this Bill, will take over Family Court work, leaving the probation service to concentrate on working with offenders.

Two days before the Bill was introduced, a little interchange took place in the House of Commons. Mr. John Bercow (Conservative) asked the Home Secretary to make a statement on his plans to change the name of the Probation Service. The Minister of State at the Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng) said he was grateful to the honourable Gentleman for the opportunity to announce that his Department had listened to the representations of those who thought CRAPS not a good idea. There had been a change of mind in the Home Office. "We intend that the new unified service will be called the National Probation Service of England and Wales."

**Mr. Bercow:** My joy at that reply is literally boundless . . . I warmly congratulate him - at the risk of inflicting the gravest possible damage on his future political career.

**Mr. Boateng:** I am delighted to have brought a little joy into the honourable Gentleman's life.

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