

CPS (again)

On December 21, last sitting day before the Christmas break of distant memory, the Solicitor General, Mr Ross Cranston MP, was questioned (again) about low morale in the Crown Prosecution Service. I discussed this strange "low morale" syndrome (what is the civil service coming to?) on June 6 last year in connection with the Bill to set up a CPS inspectorate. I warned you then that the Liberal Democrat spokesman on legal affairs, Mr John Burnett MP, had perceived "collapsing morale" in the CPS. Has this strange infection got any better? Or has it even got worse?

Before answering I should note that the Bill received royal assent on July 20 as the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000 (c. 10), and was brought into force on October 1 2000. As we now definitely know the key wording I can tell you that section 2, the only substantive provision, orders the new statutory Chief Inspector of the CPS to investigate "the operation" of the service and submit an annual report to the Attorney General on his findings. This must be laid before Parliament.

Concerning that vexed question of morale, on December 21 the following interchange took place:-

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Earlier this year, a survey on the Crown Prosecution Service was published. It disclosed that morale was at rock bottom. Since then, additional funding has been made available to the CPS. Will the Solicitor General conduct, or cause to be conducted, another independent survey into the CPS? If he does so, when will the results be published?

The Solicitor General: As I have confessed to the House previously, the survey showed that there was a problem of morale. I have also explained that, historically, the CPS was underfunded by the previous Government. The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that we are investing much more money in the CPS. This year, we are investing another £15.8 million and there will be an 8 per cent. real-terms increase over the next three years - I emphasise that that is a real-terms increase and will not occur merely in money terms. In addition, a pot of money containing more than £500 million is available to the various criminal justice agencies. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor have said that the CPS claim on that pot of money is a priority. Decisions will soon be made about the matter. Inasmuch as money and resources are the problem, we are remedying the situation that we inherited from the previous Government.

Less interest than might have been expected was taken in that intriguing "pot of money" (in fact none at all). Instead the House turned to how the criminal justice system was coping with the demands of the Human Rights Act 1998. It was coping very well, insisted Mr Cranston. For the Conservatives Mr Edward Garnier QC tried to fight back by suggesting that the greatest present attack on human rights was the Government's proposal to introduce, for the third time, a discredited measure to restrict the right to jury trial. Warily the Solicitor-General responded that they had been around that particular track a number of times.

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town) brought the House back to the question of CPS morale. The Solicitor General replied that on his frequent visits to CPS offices up and

down the country he had been impressed by the commitment and professionalism of the workers (well, as we know, he would say that). The CPS board had agreed to a number of measures to improve morale - for example, enhancing the support systems for keeping staff better informed of changes. Long-term planning had also been addressed through the "staff attitude survey" and the "stress audit steering group". (Now we see what the civil service is coming to.)

A Conservative, Mr. John Bercow, thought morale in the CPS would rise if staff felt they were delivering an improved service to the public. Mr Cranston told him new targets had been set, and were constantly monitored by the CPS inspectorate. As a result of being put on a statutory basis, he added, the inspectorate is better resourced, does much more work and constantly reports on the operation of areas. Would all that really raise CPS morale - or send it into steep decline?

A parting shot was fired by our old friend the Beast of Bolsover.

Mr. Dennis Skinner: Does the Solicitor General think that CPS morale would be improved or otherwise if it were to deal with the cases of about eight members of the Equitable Life board who have scuttled away like rats leaving a sinking ship?

The Solicitor General: If it were a responsibility of anyone under my aegis, it would be the Serious Fraud Office, but I am not saying that it has gone that far.

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