

DDN speaks to former chief inspector of prisons, Lord David Ramsbotham, about whether the criminal justice system is effectively broken, and what measures could be taken to fix it



Broken Britain

As a former chief inspector of prisons, Lord David Ramsbotham was among those who gave evidence to the inquiry that fed into the *Primary justice* report, released this week (see *news story*, page 4). The report's blunt conclusion is that Britain's criminal justice system is failing, an 'absolutely fair assessment' he says.

Is that because we're spending more money than other countries but getting worse results? 'It's how the money's spent,' he says. 'My concern is that so much money is being wasted, and a lot of it's being wasted on this absurd National Offender Management Service idea (NOMS), which simply doesn't work.'

It's fair to say he's been critical of NOMS since the beginning? 'I've been critical of it from the very moment it was even *proposed*,' he stresses. 'Because until you've gone in and done all the sums and worked out exactly how this thing is going to work, you're going to get nowhere. Well they never did that, they never consulted with anyone – David Blunkett just launched it without any sort of thought at all and everyone said 'no, you've got this wrong'. As a result they've gone blundering along, because they've never been prepared to admit that they got it wrong, and look at how much they've wasted.'

On that theme, how does he feel generally about the restructuring and reorganisation the government seems so fond of? 'That's been one of the major problems – no one's anywhere for very long, no minister stays, no idea ever gets processed and they pass laws – so called – that never come to fruition,' he says. 'They've wasted a hell of a lot of time on those – they're cancelled, and before they're cancelled something else comes along which wipes out something you've just done, and you end up with people who are utterly confused.'

You go and ask the governor of a prison who's in charge of the sex offender treatment programme or whatever, and they haven't a clue,' he continues. 'Because there are so many different branches of the National Offender Management Service, all of which seem to be spending their time avoiding any suggestion that they're responsible.'

The end result, presumably, is that the people who work in the system are completely demoralised? 'Of course they are, and then add to that the question of the probation service, which has been virtually demolished. There's now no director of the National Probation Service, there's no senior probation person in any of the higher positions of NOMS, and all they talk about is offender management. Well offender management is fine, but what you need to do is make certain that the service managing those offenders consists of staff who are properly led and know what they're doing – it just stands to reason.'

So is joined up working a reality at all? 'No it isn't, it's a myth, and the latest exposition of the myth is in the clutch of bills we've just been taking through parliament, which haven't been discussed – so there's impacts of one bill against another. For example, they were terribly excited about the *Bradley report* (2009) about the diversion of people with mental illness from custody. Well, fine – but you would have expected, if this was a flagship, that it would have been a major part of the legislation, but it's not at all. In order to get any mention of mental health in all the clutch of things coming through you actually have to go to the Welfare Reform Bill, from the Department of Work and Pensions. If you were really serious about what you were doing you'd have made absolutely certain that criminal justice represented it. The whole thing shows a complete lack of coordination and thought.'

In terms of remedying that, one of the things the *Primary justice report* – and many *In somebody else's shoes* delegates – recommends is shifting control of services to local level. Could that be an answer? 'I don't perhaps go quite as far as (*Primary justice*) on some things, but for example I've always argued for what Lord Woolf said in his report into the riots in Strangeways (*The Woolf report*, 1991) – that the three things that are most likely to prevent reoffending are a home, a job and a stable relationship, all of which are put at risk by imprisonment. Therefore what you've got to do is to mitigate the risk, and the best way to do that is to have your prisons organised on a regional basis, so that people never go too far away from home.'

'If you do that you've got some chance, as well, of involving local organisations in the delivery of programmes for their own people,' he continues. 'Human nature being what it is, if you're living in Lancashire you're more likely to help Lancashire prisoners than you are somebody suddenly coming in from Kent. So to that extent I'm all for local organisations dealing with their own prisoners as far as humanly possible – regional clusters of prisons – but that's not how things are organised now.'

And what about all the agencies – accommodation, benefits, treatment – that are supposed to step in when someone is released from prison? 'That's almost the worst bit of all. You find, again, that there's an awful lot of talk about it, but they haven't got it organised and they don't actually do a great deal of work with a lot of the offenders until they're virtually released. It's too late by then – you've had them with you for a long time, and you really ought to have done more. Leaving it as late as that is, frankly, barmy.' **DDN**