

**Rod Morgan**

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 6 October 2009 09.30 BST

# Taking the pressure off probation

**Our criminal justice system, including the probation service, is overloaded.  
It's time we stopped asking it to do the impossible**

Amelia Gentleman's diary of typical days in the lives of Bristol probation officers should spark a debate similar to that being conducted about our presence in Afghanistan. What is the enterprise for? Is it succeeding? Are we spending our money wisely? What will the position be in five years' time? But the law and order questions are arguably more serious because they affect us all, at home, every day.

The probation service is under stress. It's being asked to do a near-impossible job. This is because our criminal justice system is generally overloaded – every part of it, from policing to the courts to the penal system. It's not in crisis, a description too often invoked. It's not going to collapse in the sense that the lights may go out. But it's creaking and most people are only aware of the fact when catastrophes such as the Sonnex case occur. Then someone, usually a technician who fails to question the overall shape of the enterprise, looks closely at the immediate operational background and finds that the luckless probation officer who "failed" had not been issued with boots suitable for desert conditions – in this case, that she was inexperienced, had a caseload of 127 and no effective supervisor.

For about 30 years, we've had a law and order arms race between the Conservatives and Labour. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher promised to spend more on law and order while cutting expenditure elsewhere. She did, principally by paying the police a lot more. In 1997, New Labour came out of their years in the wilderness by overtaking the Tories on the right. They promised to out-tough their predecessors. And they have. We now have a record prison population of 84,000 and the latest Ministry of Justice projections foresee no prospect of it declining.

Every dreadful event, whether it involves dangerous dogs or the carrying of knives, is responded to with yet another criminal justice bill; we criminalise more and more behaviour (including that judged antisocial); sentences become more severe and the restrictions imposed on offenders ever tighter. These restrictions have then to be strictly enforced to protect the dignity of the system. Public expectations of what can and should be delivered by the police are inflated (I hope everyone reading this knows the name and telephone number of their neighbourhood beat officer). And our children are to be better safeguarded by one in five of us having to register with the Safeguarding Authority so that others can be sure we're not paedophiles.

Where now? Will ministers shortly tell us that, yes, there will have to be major public expenditure cuts but there will be as many police officers on our streets, as many offenders locked up and under close supervision? If they do we should not believe them. There can't and shouldn't be. It's neither sensible or sustainable. Law and order parsimony should be the watchword. Policing is a function not always best undertaken by the police, nor do police officers have to do most police jobs. Antisocial behaviour is seldom best tackled by criminalising the offenders. A high proportion of the probation caseload don't need supervision. And many prisoners would be better dealt with in the community. The probation service is already facing cuts. Let the probation service be asked to do that which it is necessary it does.