

Police raid on British prison raises awkward questions

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The parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee has launched an inquiry into why nearly 100 prison officers made a late night raid on what is regarded as one of Britain's most progressive prisons.

On May 5, police officers dressed in riot gear and armed with Alsatian dogs and sledgehammers stormed Blantyre House, on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent. It is only one of two "resettlement prisons" designed for prisoners close to their release.

Although some of the officers were from a special "control and restraint" team, the raid was not in response to any problems with the prisoners. There had been no outbreak of disorder, such as a riot, nor was one threatened. Rather the Home Office launched the action on the basis of "intelligence reports" of illegal activity at Blantyre House.

Martin Narey, Deputy Director General of the Prison Service ordered the raid. He justified it by stating that, "The intelligence I received included information to suggest that there were discrepancies with security arrangements and that some prisoners might be involved in criminal activities."

In addition, prison governor, Eoin McLellan-Murray, with 30 years experience, his deputy David Newport and other members of staff were asked to clear their desks and vacate Blantyre House.

Prisoner Paul Collins, who witnessed the raid, said the police, "were completely up for it. They charged into the rooms shouting F***ing get out of your cell you c**t. The prisoners were then pushed into the corridor and forced to take urine tests. Everything we had was shaken out and taken apart. The doors of the prison church, hospital and gym were smashed in".

Narey later said credit cards, forged passports and escape equipment had been seized. Labour's Minister for Prisons Paul Boateng said the raid had been done in

"close police liaison", but refused further comment due, he claimed, to an ongoing police investigation. However, a spokesman from Kent police denied this, saying, "there is no ongoing police investigation".

Before the raid, stories were leaked to the press—mainly in the form of gossip—that prisoners were engaged in criminal rackets in the cells and officers were taking bribes to allow prisoners to move from other prisons because of the "easy life" at Blantyre House. Yet three months have passed since the raid and no one has been prosecuted. The "stolen bank cards" turned out to be legally held and the alleged false driving licence was legally owned by a person who had changed their name. The so-called "escape equipment" consisted of tools owned by a prisoner who was working as a builder repairing a Mencap charity shop as part of his pre-release programme. None of the urine samples taken proved positive for drugs. The only unauthorised items found were three mobile phones, six items of pornography and £40 in cash.

It appears that the raid was not because of any illegal activities on the part of inmates or staff, but was motivated by political opposition to the gaol's more liberal regime within the prison service.

Blantyre House is very small, housing just 120 prisoners who are close to the end of their sentences. To accustom inmates to life outside prison they are allowed out on a "temporary release" basis, to do work in the community. This also enables them to earning a certain amount of money, which they must save in a bank account until their final release.

It had the lowest positive results from nation-wide random drug testing last year of 0.7 percent. There have been no reports of assaults on staff. Last year, 16,000 licences were given to inmates for temporary release and only two prisoners failed to return on time. The rate

of re-offending by former Blantyre House inmates is 8 per cent, compared with a national average of 54 percent.

Describing the regime, one prisoner said, “The staff trusted me. There was no ‘them and us’. I did not have to get violent or take drugs to prove myself. I had to confront what I had done for the first time in my life and sort myself out.”

Only recently, the Labour chairperson of the Home Affairs Select Committee described Blantyre House as a "model" prison. Even the right wing Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe praised the prison and said, “there are too few resettlement prisons. Instead of reducing the precious few facilities available, we should seek to expand them”.

This March, Sir David Ramsbotham, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, issued a report of an inspection of Blantyre House in January for which he provided an introduction. He began by citing favourable comments about the facility stretching back to 1992, in which various top officials recommended its ethos as “excellent” and “constructive”.

He went on to note that, “these views appeared not to be shared by other parts of Prison Service Headquarters who continue to regard Blantyre House as a category C training prison, with a resettlement function, and judge it accordingly. The resulting tension so alarmed the very active Board of Visitors, that they wrote expressing their concerns to the Director General, Mr Martin Narey”.

Ramsbotham cited former Director General of the Prison Service Sir Richard Tilt as stating, “Blantyre House performs a valued role as a resettlement prison within the Service. Its general ethos supports its special function, and I am committed to protecting this.” He then adds, “However, other parts of Prison Service Headquarters continued to believe otherwise. It was audited recently by the Operation Standards Team, and, unsurprisingly to us at least, failed miserably as a Category C prison, the level of security being nowhere near what is required of such an establishment”.

Harry Fletcher, a spokesman for the National Association of Probation Officers, said of the raid, “There needs to be an inquiry because it seems mightily convenient that this search happened when the Prison Service was facing opposition to its plans to change the role of the prison.” He added that, “the hard

line of the Home Office was being challenged by a jail that actually worked. They could not tolerate its success”.

There is no need to uncritically accept the general assertion that Blantyre House is a model correctional facility to realise that significant sections of those responsible for Britain's prison system would dearly love to discredit it. What is more, while the government may have initially given the prison nominal support, a more liberal regime for prisoners flies in the face of Labour's usual rhetoric about being "tough on crime". This, and a refusal to challenge the right wing elements within the prison service given succour by Labour's law-and-order nostrums, indicates why no government official has been prepared to comment on the extraordinary events at Blantyre House.



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