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Approaching the Centenary of Probation in the UK

The year 2007 will see the centenary of the supervision of offenders by Probation Officers in the UK. From its roots with Police Court missionaries simply aiming to save fallen women and drunken men through Christianity, to today's highly structured, target driven, nationally controlled service, it has changed significantly.

It took 94 years to create one national service but the centenary year may see the start of it being dismantled.

In 2003 the Carter report recommended significant changes to the delivery of Criminal Justice and correctional services. His vision was the joining of Prison and Probation Services, better focused sentencing, more effective management of offenders and greater diversity in who delivered those services for better value.

The vision is sound in most parts but practice, as usual, is more problematic. It is in part dependent on targeted sentencing but the history of sentencing in the UK is that Sentencers exercise their powers as they see fit and not necessarily as the Government would like. The change has also created a central bureaucracy that has grown rapidly from 500 to 2100 in 2 and half years. The more effective management of offenders is developing whilst Government is facing massive opposition to its plans for commissioning services, or contestability. There is a sense that criminal justice policy is in a mess, often led by media headlines, which the government then exploit as justification for driving through its changes.

Through all this the Probation Service, though under funded and massively over-stretched, is performing at unprecedented high levels against targets that increase every year.

So, as Probation in the UK enters its centenary year, we have an enormous amount to be proud of and to celebrate. At the same time the centenary year may see the passing of legislation that will fragment the Service as we know it and endanger many of the huge gains made in the protection of the public from dangerous offenders.