

### 3

## Institutional Culture and Power in HMP Wellingborough

Sparks *et al.* (1996: 306) argue that most overviews of penal problems lack ‘any developed awareness of the ways in which the broad outlines of policy and the local construction of social relations in prison interact’. The aim of the previous chapter was to draw the general contours of recent penalty and provide some detail about the history, function, and priorities of HMP Wellingborough. The aim of this chapter is to take a step from the general to the specific—to move from policy abstractions, official declarations and matters of context to more concrete issues of how power and culture took shape in the prison.

The chapter begins by characterizing Wellingborough’s general ethos, and moves on to outline the views and practices that were characteristic of its uniformed workforce. It describes how organizational aims (such as decency, control, and rehabilitation) and techniques (in particular, targets) were perceived by uniformed staff and managers, how both groups experienced their authority, and how relationships with prisoners were structured by these factors. The chapter explains some of the pressures and constraints on the prison’s workforce, describes the relationships between staff strata, and presents an initial analysis of the nature and location of institutional power. These features of the prison are then linked to specific institutional factors and more general characteristics of the managerial era.

### Wellingborough’s Culture, Values, and Practices

HMP Wellingborough did not have a strong identity within the Prison Service. It was not known to be either consistently high-achieving or under-performing; it had experienced no major incidents, and, unlike some Cat-Cs, it did not carry a reputation as a ‘dumping ground’ or ‘punishment prison’. Staff often commented

that the prison was seen as something of a 'sleepy hollow', serving an area with few large cities and sited on an anonymous edge of a small town. The prison was often said to have a 'family feel'. An uncommonly high number of staff were related to or in relationships with each other, and many had only worked at Wellingborough during their prison careers. The prison also had a relatively high proportion of female officers (almost 30 per cent) and operational support grades (OSGs), giving it a less macho feel than many other establishments.

Wellingborough's uniformed workforce was well balanced in terms of age, with some notable differences between the orientations of staff of different experience. Many older officers were nostalgic for an earlier era of imprisonment and for the clear lines of authority of the past. These officers often held prisoners in low esteem, emphasizing their greed and moral turpitude and supporting the maintenance of a clear status distinction between prisoners and staff. Many felt that the regime was too 'soft', and that prisoners were being 'spoon-fed'. Despite these views, they were not the brusque, indifferent 'dinosaurs' dominant in many establishments, nor the 'hardline' staff who imposed rules to the letter (see McLean and Liebling 2008). Some were exceptional at dealing with prisoners, handling volatile situations and ensuring the calm maintenance of the daily routine. Many attributed this 'jailcraft' to the prison's borstal days and to years of 'life experience', often accumulated through time in the armed forces. They bemoaned the inexperience of younger officers, who they saw as socially naïve, careless in their use of authority, and incapable of using discretion appropriately. As one old-timer lamented:

They seem more concerned with getting the computer right, rather than talking to inmates. If it says so, they do it. If it doesn't, [they'll] nick them. Never mind about talking to them to find out what's wrong. There are some that wouldn't give [prisoners] the time of day.

These older officers frequently complained that 'paperwork and computer work' had become more important than 'getting on that landing, and going and talking to them'. In this respect, they felt out of touch with developments in custodial work. Some were recognized by their colleagues as having excellent interpersonal skills that compensated somewhat for their other deficiencies. Others were regarded as lazy and half-hearted (Crawley 2004a),

doing little more than drinking tea and tidying things over until shifts were completed.

These 'avoiders' (Liebling and Price 2001) and officers with punitive personal views separated private feelings from professional behaviour by invoking ideas of public duty and loyalty to the Service.<sup>1</sup> Such officers saw their work in vocational terms, as a 'job for life'—an attitude that could engender loyalty but could also signify a somewhat static notion of what the job should entail. Terms of this kind were used far less often by younger and more recent recruits. These officers were more likely to have entered the Prison Service from light industry and service sectors than from the military (see Crawley 2004a). The majority described their initial motivations for entering prison work in instrumental terms, as a way of 'paying the mortgage' and securing a good pension. Many saw the Prison Service as one among a number of career providers that might offer job satisfaction and personal development, but would be discarded if it failed to do so (see Sennett 1998; Bauman 2000). Such officers rarely expressed pride in the uniform or a strong sense of corporate loyalty:

I've never even thought about being proud of it. I just come in, do my work, do whatever I can for other people and go home.

*Some officers talk about having a kind of loyalty to the service and a pride in the ....*

I've got no loyalty...it's all about my own self. [I like to do] a good day's work, but I don't even think about doing a service to the Queen, to the country, anything like that, it's all about me, how it makes me feel, you know.

For these younger staff, decency was grounded as much in a personal sense of what constituted moral behaviour as in a professional notion of service. Some were the most committed and professional staff in the establishment. Few reported having joined in order to 'make a difference', but a number operated with drive and humanity, which they attributed to private values about what effort and treatment was 'right'. Other young officers—both

<sup>1</sup> It was these officers who most often bemoaned the invisibility of their labour, and the lack of public recognition that they were in effect an 'emergency service' (see Crawley and Crawley 2008). They were also most sensitive to issues of symbolic recognition, for example, the fact that, at the time of study, the Golden Jubilee Medal could be awarded to members of the Armed Forces, and the three main emergency services, but not to Prison Service staff.

male and female—were highly rule-governed, operating without punitive ‘edge’ but with little empathy or diplomacy.

The tone of Wellingborough’s staff-prisoner relations was set by the benign cohort of its experienced workforce, and was maintained through mundane conversation and censure. Derision was expressed for officers who shirked responsibilities, who cherished their power unduly, and who ignored or alienated prisoners. Excessive machismo was also ridiculed. Officers on one wing mocked the posturings of those officers ‘who swagger around as if they’ve got a pole stuck up their arse’.<sup>2</sup> A new recruit was reprimanded for starting a shift by announcing that it was ‘time to let the animals out of their cages’. As colleagues discussed after the event, language of that kind was not part of Wellingborough’s ethos.

It was in such ways that a basic degree of interpersonal respect was embedded throughout Wellingborough’s culture (see HMCIP 2000; 2003). In its reception unit, the area of the prison where culture is first set, the tone was polite and informal. Prisoners were not coldly ‘processed’, nor was their status and powerlessness deliberately reinforced.<sup>3</sup> ‘You *know* you’re in prison when you’re being called by your second name’, one prisoner commented. Many prisoners remarked that the procedure was less dehumanizing than in most establishments, and commented that this typified initial encounters with officers. ‘This is the only prison I’ve ever been in where they treat you with respect before you treat them’, one prisoner observed. On the induction wing, officers took pride in ‘giving a chance’ to prisoners with records for non-compliance, and celebrated their ability to ‘break the cycle’ of mutual mistrust. It was rare to hear officers using abusive language towards

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say the officer culture was not, in all manner of ways, fairly macho. Many officers took pride in activities such as burping and yelling as loudly as possible to gain prisoners’ attention. At lunchtime, while education staff tended to use the prison’s gym to play badminton or short-tennis, officers were more likely to push weights. Several were training for ‘hard-man’ and triathlon events. Conversations revolved around sport, DIY, sexual innuendo, and domestic issues such as personal finances, television, the news, holidays, and the politics of the prison. Female as well as male officers participated in these conversations and practices.

<sup>3</sup> This was in contrast to reception procedures I had observed several months earlier in another Cat-C training prison, where prisoners were left in little doubt that officers were in charge and underwent a much more deliberate process of status degradation.

prisoners, provocation was very uncommon, and wings never felt acutely tense. Prisoners frequently contrasted the friendliness of Wellingborough officers with the culture of more traditional Cat-Cs, where 'screws go round speaking to you with attitude, and calling you wanker and dickhead, and names like that' (Leon).<sup>4</sup>

Wellingborough was consistently described as a 'laid-back' and 'easy-going' establishment:

This is one of the best jails I've ever been in. The first impression, and the attitude of staff, you're on first name terms with most of the staff and they're quite relaxed. (Alfie)

It's laid back. It's like a different world compared to other jails. When I first come here I couldn't believe how the officers were, I couldn't believe how they spoke to you—they spoke to you like normal people; if you wanted help on something they'd go and find out for you. (Dom)

The officers here are very easy-going. Whereas [prison X] is a screws' nick: they'll just bust in anybody's cell on the slightest whim. And they'll be carried off and you'll never see them again. Here they're a bit more laid back and a lot more easygoing. (Noah)

Relative to other prisons, Wellingborough was not an authoritarian establishment. Officers sought to persuade rather than threaten prisoners into everyday compliance, and took satisfaction from the informal relationships that they cultivated. 'Direct orders' were uncommon, reversion to force (through official techniques of 'control and restraint') was rare, and staff did not 'get on your back'.<sup>5</sup> For many prisoners, it was 'a soft jail, but in a good way' (prisoner, fieldwork notes)—a place where one would not be provoked into conflict.

Prisoners attributed Wellingborough's relaxed atmosphere to a number of factors beside staff attitudes. Excluding a phase at the start of the fieldwork, the prison was not awash with drugs, making it considerably less edgy than many establishments ('street jails'). Second, it was a prison where all men except those on the 'basic' privilege level were allowed to wear their own clothes.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Screws': a derogatory term for officers.

<sup>5</sup> In HMP Stafford, adjudications often related to the use of staff authority, with prisoners frequently charged for disobeying lawful orders e.g. to go to work. Such charges were very rare at HMP Wellingborough, illustrating this difference in the use of power.

<sup>6</sup> In most prisons, the IEP scheme operates with three levels: basic, standard, and enhanced.

This policy had a significant impact on prisoners' self-perceptions and their view of their environment: 'it just makes you feel yourself; you feel more at home in your own clothes' (Leon). The use of such vocabulary also related to more formal features of the regime. Evening exercise was rarely cancelled, and—unlike some other Cat-Cs—there were not strict rules about where prisoners could stand or how they should address staff.<sup>7</sup>

However, prisoners consistently complained that Wellingborough's regime was restricted and that they had expected 'a bit more freedom' (Connor). Exercise areas were small, there were few opportunities to get fresh air, and prisoners could not mingle on other wings during evening exercise. As in many other Cat-Cs, in the shadow of barbed-wire fences, the prison had large grounds, but these were off-limits to prisoners except in special circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Many commented that, in terms of perimeter security and freedom of movement, the differences between Wellingborough and most Cat-Bs were negligible: 'the only difference is you can walk to work by yourself. You can walk along the corridor. But you're not getting any more trust really' (Ross).<sup>9</sup> Prisoners arriving from Cat-B training prisons felt that life in Cat-Cs was pettier and more repressive, and that Cat-B staff had given them more 'slack': '[they] don't get on your back [in Cat-B], because they don't want riots, they don't want trouble' (Nathan).

Prisoners arriving from Cat-B training prisons were also bemused to find that they were not allowed to use tools or make items that had not been barred in higher-security prisons. Den complained that he was not allowed to have a pottery mask, 'in case I try to escape!' 'Security' was considered the meta-excuse of the institution. Staff were certainly preoccupied with security issues. Any decrease in the number of Security Information Reports

<sup>7</sup> In some other Cat-Cs, prisoners were given evening association only on alternate days; and in one Cat-C at which many prisoners had spent time, prisoners were disciplined if they stepped over lines painted onto the floor without permission.

<sup>8</sup> On one occasion, prisoners had the frustration of being locked up to allow staff to play an inter-prison football match on a pitch that was visible to them from their cells, but to which their access was highly restricted.

<sup>9</sup> Matt joked about the number of fences that surrounded the wings: 'it's like the Grand National or something. You'd fucking bleed to death before you got out over there!'

was interpreted as a failure of staff to be sufficiently alert. Many officers assumed that all prisoners were 'up to no good': 'Ninety-five per cent have security reports written on them, and the rest we just haven't caught yet!', a security officer commented.

Terms such as 'relaxed' and 'laid back' were also used by officers, intimating both the positive and negative aspects of Wellingborough's culture. First, this vocabulary signalled a reluctance to question established ways of operating and a comfort in the prison's traditions. One senior officer outlined this tendency as follows:

You can have [bedding] posted in, but you can't have it handed in on a visit. Why? Nobody can answer that question. 'Ooh, well we don't do it like that.' They're very backward looking. They will say 'oh, we used to do it this way and it worked.' You can tell [most] staff have never worked anywhere other than Wellingborough. They're very...dogmatic, very set in their ways.

Second, it reflected a slightly lethargic culture, in which officers were slow to take initiative and resolve problems.<sup>10</sup> Staff at all levels of the prison identified this ethos—'a *mañana* type attitude—things don't always get done as quickly as they might' (senior officer)—as part of the 'Wellingborough way'. The following example was given by a senior officer:

We've got eight [new prisoners] coming in. So I rang the VTU, and they went 'oh, we haven't got any TVs. If they want to come down they're going to have to know they haven't got any TVs'. 'Well why haven't you got any TVs?' 'Well, they broke them'. 'Well why haven't you fixed them then?' 'Well we've been told we've got to wait until April'. 'How long have you known that you haven't got any TV's?' 'Oh, a week' 'So why didn't you try to get them repaired?' 'Well it's not our job.' In this prison, staff do not use their own initiative. Basic stuff doesn't get done.

Although Wellingborough's officer culture was largely benign, this took a passive rather than active form. Bennett had noted that staff harboured fewer negative attitudes than in most prisons, and expressed less kneejerk resistance to change. Lewis observed a similar desire among officers to 'do a good job, by and large', and a genuine interest in prisoner welfare. Wellingborough certainly did

<sup>10</sup> One prisoner claimed that, when he and his fellow wing workers had pointed out that there were no clean pillowcases for the weekly kit change, officers had walked away, stating that 'all we're here to do is bang everyone up'.

not have a traditional culture of obstruction to reform, antipathy to prisoners, and engrained suspicion of governors. But nor was it a dynamic or purposeful prison, where officers were proactive in assisting prisoners—particularly once staff morale began to wane. On the one hand then, officers did not stonewall prisoner complaints, and were normally helpful in response to questions and requests. As Jordan noted: ‘If you ask for something to be checked up, it usually gets done. Sometimes it gets done months later, but it usually gets done in the end. Whereas in every other prison I’ve been in it doesn’t get done at all’. On the other hand, this was a reactive—at its worst, a rather inert—form of assistance: ‘If you don’t put yourself out there and tell them what you want, you don’t get it. They’ll just leave you’, said Connor; ‘We have to fucking scream to get the[ir] attention’, Zack declared.

Many officers did little to make themselves available to prisoners. On evening association, staff were rarely seen on the landings and mingled very little with prisoners in recreational areas. Dynamic officers stood out against the prevailing culture of the wings. As one highly motivated officer commented:<sup>11</sup>

Certain officers are quite content to lean against the radiator all day or sit on a chair [with] a cup of tea. [My view is] If you hear the cell bell going off here, don’t just turn it off and then come back in. If you’re going to turn it off you’ve got to answer it. I do fall out with officers quite a lot over their lack of enthusiasm.

Despite the high rate of prisoner inactivity, officers appeared unconcerned about finding ways to get prisoners out of their cells. This inertia was particularly striking on E-wing, where ‘pods’ in which activity could have been organized sat empty, and prisoners often waited several weeks before being allocated to work or education.<sup>12</sup> Such failures were partly systemic. As the newly

<sup>11</sup> In a quality of prison life survey conducted by the Prison Service Standards Audit Unit in May 2004—some months after the fieldwork period had ended—prisoners remained unhappy about the inaccessibility and lack of help from staff, long waiting lists for work, the amount of time spent in cells, and the prison’s security level. As was consistent with previous reports, prisoners were positive about the levels of property and possessions that the prison allowed, in-cell TV, the prison’s gym, education facilities and courses, the induction programme, and relationships with staff.

<sup>12</sup> Shortly after the fieldwork period ended, some of the prison’s more menial work was moved from a workshop onto the induction wing in order to provide at least some activity for incoming prisoners.

appointed Head of Learning and Skills noted, the prison did little to tap into its own potential: 'we have workshops where we train people in carpentry and painting and decorating, but we always call in outside contractors to do the work'.

Third, uniformed staff at Wellingborough lacked a vision of 'performance' and 'service-delivery'. Officers understood the need for targets, audits, and public sector efficiency.<sup>13</sup> But the majority were either unaware of the targets by which the prison was evaluated, or saw little relationship between these targets and their everyday practices. As a senior officer observed:

On ground level I'd say we don't take a lot of notice of KPIs or KPTs at all. We do what we need to do on a daily basis to get through. Some of the targets, they are made to do things right, you know, a lot of stuff used to be [too lax]. [But] I wouldn't think prisoners are beneficiaries of it. I mean you speak to staff about KPIs and KPTs and they just glaze over. It means nothing to them. I suppose it is good to see how you perform against other Cat-Cs, but it doesn't affect us on a day to day basis, it doesn't affect how we do our job, the only thing it makes a difference to is the governors—whether they get a big budget or not.

In part, the cynicism expressed here reflected an awareness of the creative means with which some targets were achieved. Prisoners were sent to one workshop regardless of whether there was work to be done, allowing them to be marked down as 'in work' even if they were playing cards for most of the day. Senior managers were also sceptical of certain aspects of target culture. One governor outlined the flaws in resettlement targets, noting that there was no means of validating prisoners' claims about their employment status on release. Another explained that 'certain targets are being reached but at the expense of others. We do get a bit bogged down sometimes making sure that there's an audit trail'.

Whatever their reservations, governors were the institutional enforcers of target culture. In the eyes of uniformed staff, they were inextricably associated with performance management. This contributed significantly to widespread mistrust about their motives and expertise. A typical belief—here expressed somewhat extremely—was that governors were 'people with no idea of what it is like on the ground floor, who make arbitrary decisions on things they don't understand on information they're

<sup>13</sup> Many were proud citizens but reluctant taxpayers.

given by people who have never been in prison' (senior officer). This cynicism was exacerbated by the feeling that targets were being pursued at the expense of staff welfare, and that they were unachievable given the meagre resources being allocated in their pursuit.<sup>14</sup> Many officers believed that governors were preoccupied with targets because of links to earnings: 'it affects their money and their bonus'. Most saw management as highly self-interested: '[They're] on the side of furthering their career. I don't think they're out to improve prisoners' lives; they never stay at one prison for more than two or three years' (officer interviews).

Officers recognized that governors operated under stringent financial constraints and that the prison's staffing situation could not be resolved instantaneously. Nonetheless, they felt aggrieved at bearing the burdens of management decisions, and complained that governors were failing to protect them from the pressures of the institutional world above them. As one officer protested: 'it's all right them saying, "we know you're one [officer] short today, but can you open up and run the wing", because it reflects on their performance. But they're not the ones actually on the landings, [facing] any repercussions.' In such situations, officers exaggerated the risks that lean staffing entailed. Wellingborough was very safe, relative to other prisons, with no history of unrest and a low rate of staff assaults. Such protests signalled an emotional climate of under-appreciation, insecurity, neediness, and neurosis more than they reflected actual risks of physical assault.<sup>15</sup>

Officers were also sceptical about the official language of decency and rehabilitation. This was not because they were opposed to rehabilitative practices or the fundamentals of decent treatment. On the contrary, most officers supported the provision of better training and education facilities, particularly in the interests

<sup>14</sup> 'We've got to have targets. We have to have goals and aims, without them we've got nothing. But the goals and aims should be targets for us to achieve if we had the facilities, it shouldn't be targets to be achieved at the cost of the sanity of a member of staff, which is what we're getting. Has anybody wondered why you've got thirteen, fourteen staff on long-term sick? It's not a coincidence, it coincides with the fact that we never lock a wing up, staff are all owed hours, they're asked to come in and work, they're bullied, cajoled, threatened in some cases. The numbers don't add up. You know, and somebody's authorizing this' (senior officer).

<sup>15</sup> Evidence from recent research (Liebling *et al.* 2005) has shown that staff perceptions of safety are related less to assault levels than issues such as trust in senior management and confidence in one's occupational role.

of public protection. In particular, the idea of 'preventing the next victim' held considerable appeal to uniformed staff. Most also recognized that prisoners deserved dignified and respectful treatment. What they resented was the disparity between rhetoric and reality: a language of rehabilitation when they saw prisoners working in inadequate and outdated workshops, and a discourse of decency at a time of funding cuts and overcrowding. The deficiencies of Wellingborough's provision were also apparent to most prisoners: 'if it was about rehabilitation you wouldn't have fucking stupid jobs like [trolley fixing] where they pay a lot of money for doing fuck all, and then education paying you half of that' (Callum).

Staff of all grades complained that senior prison service personnel expected decency to be delivered without providing the resources to enable it. 'I am only allowed to deliver the basics because that's all I can get resourced for', noted one principal officer. One governor provided a more expansive description:

The problem we've got as a service is obviously the population pressures, which really has a massive impact on what we can deliver. [...] Over the last four or five years we've been making cutbacks and economies, and yet the population has still increased. I think we're getting to a stage where we're struggling to make any more economies, [especially] if we're [talking about] actually doing something purposeful with prisoners. Because you can play numbers around till you're blue in the face, and you can hit targets, but if they're meaningless targets, and they're just number crunching, then it's a really pointless exercise, and we can only do so much quality work with the [number of] people that we've got.

For uniformed staff, the same perceptions were exacerbated by a perception that managers were so focused on performance targets that they were blind to the moral realities of the landings. A senior officer highlighted this disjuncture as follows:

When I can't give a new inmate a pillowcase because we haven't got any because we haven't got any money left in the budget, that's disgraceful. It's not decency is it? You know, we can't even provide these people with pillowcases and proper clean bedding every week, but we're supposed to be a model of public sector reform. In theory we do provide a clean pillowcase every week, clean towels. In practice we tend not to, but they'll tell you we do. If you went up and saw a manager and said 'do they get clean pillowcases?' he'd say 'yeah, every week'. I told [a governor] at the weekend that we hadn't had clean pillowcases for five weeks. 'Yes you have'; 'No we haven't'. 'The laundry said you have'. 'Well I'm telling you we haven't'. They listen to what they want to hear.

Wing officers explained the daily struggles of delivering decency: of guaranteeing that non-smokers were not sharing cells with smokers when there was no spare cell capacity, to give a minor example. Decent treatment was easier in theory than practice, officers argued: 'Nobody gets in [Martin Narey's] space and calls him a tosser and abuses him. If they did he might understand what it feels like' (senior officer).

Such a statement was telling in indicating the limitations of decency within the prison. Although decent treatment was a taken-for-granted part of Wellingborough's ethos, the definition of decency was not explicit, nor was it articulated in moral terms. Little thought was given to *why* good relations mattered, or how they could be assured in situations when it might be easier to abandon them i.e. when prisoners were abusive or highly demanding. The version of decency that uniformed staff articulated was primarily *instrumental*: 'if we're talking nicely to each other it's really hard for one of them to break my jaw' (senior officer); 'it's a lot easier to speak to people than fight with people' (officer). This is not to suggest that officers were indifferent to the moral dimensions of imprisonment. Officers recognized the legitimacy of prisoners' basic expectations to be able to maintain contact with their families, to live in decent and safe conditions, and to be treated with civility. Most rehearsed the dictum that incarceration served '*as not for* punishment'. Acts of concern and compassion were common. Yet concern and compassion were not entrenched parts of officer culture, and although officers generally treated prisoners with respect, they were not particularly sympathetic to prisoners' frustrations. This represented a somewhat foreshortened sense of decency.

Courteous interactions also concealed more punitive, censorious sentiments. Most officers viewed crime as an individual choice. Punishment was seen as just desserts for immoral or impulsive conduct. As one officer explained:

[Prisoners whinge that] 'the food's crap, I can't get in touch with my girlfriend'. My stock answer is 'well, you knew that when you committed your crime'. Prison can't be that harsh and that bad if they can go out and re-offend and come back. I'm of the opinion [that] we all have the choice.

Prisoners' complaints and excuses were frequently dismissed through the adage that 'we all have problems in life'. Such direct comparisons of predicament reflected a perception among officers that governors were more concerned about prisoner welfare

than staff issues. Managerial decisions were seen as zero-sum equations, whereby anything that benefited one party worked to the detriment of the other. One senior officer decried a situation where officers could not always get leave to attend family funerals, 'cos prisoners have to come out to play table tennis. If that would have been an inmate, they'd have gone—and none of us have got sentences. They forget that!' When feeling collectively undervalued, officers thus compared their plight to that of prisoners. One complained that the staff showers had been faulty for several weeks, whereas 'if it'd been this lot, it would've been sorted straightaway'. Another declared himself irritated that he was 'being asked to do things for people who are morally inferior' (fieldwork notes). 'Human rights' were generally seen as a liberal indulgence. Such sentiments—although not universal—were indicative of a common belief that prisoners were less eligible for decent treatment than people who upheld the law.<sup>16</sup> They also illustrated the failure of Wellingborough's management team to convince officers that improvements in the quality of life for prisoners were likely to improve the working lives of staff.

There were other indications of a more disrespectful streak within officer culture. In backstage areas, officers often used highly derogatory language about prisoners, describing them as 'shitbags' or 'arses', and joking about the concerns of vulnerable individuals. Such terms were rarely used in public exchanges with prisoners, and care for the vulnerable was good, illustrating the complex relationship between front and backstage behaviour.<sup>17</sup> But the careless use of language betrayed a widespread perception that prisoners were lesser social objects. Explaining the prison's rules to a group of new arrivals, one officer turned to me and stated, at audible volume, that 'to you and me this might be simple, but to this lot it isn't'. A group of incoming prisoners was described as 'rejects from the Lincoln riot' while they stood by. Officers often discussed the 'mentality' of 'inmates' in highly generic terms, oblivious that they were objectifying the prisoners working silently around them.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that prisoners and staff shared a belief that the other party were 'volunteers' within the institution, and therefore had no cause to complain about their conditions.

<sup>17</sup> Officers performed to each other as well as to prisoners, and it was not clear which performances reflected their real views. Furthermore, as Crawley (2004) argues, the dark humour of the prison can arguably be seen as a coping mechanism in the same way that it is in other forms of frontline work, such as nursing.

In front of the servery workers, two officers claimed that their habit of making jokes as each prisoner collected his food made them: ‘all feel a bit special. Most of them don’t understand it, but they like it!’<sup>18</sup> Many prisoners became inured to these mundane incivilities—signs of their denuded social status.

Incivilities were supplemented by a tendency for officers to misconceive ‘banter’ as a form of egalitarian exchange. One explained that he liked to joke with prisoners that: ‘all inmates are shitbags but some are better than others. [I] call them bastards, nonces and everything else.’<sup>19</sup> It might sound a bit harsh, [but] it’s in fun, and they swear at me. It’s part of my banter!’ Some prisoners did enjoy such exchanges, but many resented being allocated generic nicknames (‘Jock’ for a Scot, ‘Scouser’ for anyone from Liverpool, etc) and being addressed in ways that presumed their desire to engage in pseudo-friendly dialogue.<sup>20</sup> Many officers failed to recognize that banter was often predicated on power differentials, and that such conditions could make it condescending and insulting—an aspect of domination. Here, the use of power was careless.

Elsewhere, it was telling that officers were resistant to practices that would symbolically reduce the status differential between themselves and prisoners. There was considerable opposition to addressing prisoners by their preferred names.<sup>21</sup> Most officers were happy to use first names or nicknames once familiarity had been established, but they tended to do so on their own terms and in ways that were not reciprocal. Most felt that prisoners should not call them by their names until that right was ‘earned’.

<sup>18</sup> On one occasion, when trying to rearrange a prisoner interview by phoning from one wing to another, I asked to speak to the prisoner in question, rather than communicate with him via the officer who had answered the phone, next to whom he was standing. Although the officer was happy to hand the phone to the prisoner, an E-wing officer who overheard my request was dumbfounded: speaking to a prisoner in this way was ‘just not done’. The incident exposed some of the contradictions between the prison’s claims to encourage responsibility and autonomy and some of its routine practices.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Nonce’ is a derogatory term for a sex-offender.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Certain screws, they’re cracking a joke with you, you know, “watch yourself, Scouser’s about, put your hands on your wallets”. I mean, it does play on my mind, that, a bit. They just start stereotyping me. It shouldn’t be done, whether it’s a joke or not. I don’t turn round and say “watch yourself, there’s a screw about”. It’s not right. He’s here to do his job not to pass judgement on me’. (Ross)

<sup>21</sup> Even at senior levels and in management meetings, prisoners were often referred to by surnames alone.

Some officers also reinforced moral distance by pointing out that they had come from similar backgrounds as prisoners but had resisted criminal temptations and chosen lawful pathways in life.

Further, although officers were committed to judging prisoners on the basis of present rather than past behaviour, the corollary of this ethos was that respect was to some degree withheld from prisoners who were difficult or abusive:

Respect is earned, respect is never given freely, yeah? I can treat with humanity, dignity and respect somebody who isn't standing in my face and calling me a useless wanker. [But] You can't respect somebody who does nothing but abuse you because you do what you're supposed to do. Respect is earned (senior officer).

Some of them don't deserve [sympathy], because they're total arses towards you, you know, you try and help them and they just sort of blank you. And then about a week later they might come to you and I'll say 'look, you didn't want to know last week ...' (wing officer).

Both prisoners and officers saw respect as the outcome of reciprocal behaviour. However each believed that the onus was on the other to set the terms of interpersonal engagement. For prisoners, this related to the power imbalances of the prison—the sense that it was officers who had more scope to create either good or bad relationships, and that staff should appreciate their frustrations (Liebling 2001). In contrast, officers saw the issue in terms of status, role, and morality (and saw symbols of these things, such as their uniform, as the keystones of respect, whereas prisoners emphasized interpersonal qualities, such as decency and humanity): as the possessors of legitimate and moral authority, respect was rightfully theirs. It was for prisoners to prove their own moral worth.

### *Officer culture and power*

Wellingborough officers were not generally militant and did not share with their union leaders nostalgia for the era of austerity and staff power.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the POA was seen by many of its own

<sup>22</sup> It was interesting to note that the POA's leading members gravitated towards working in the segregation unit. In part, this was due to a macho attraction to working in the prison's 'difficult' areas. It also reflected the appeal of having limited prisoner contact, and working in a zone where power differentials between staff and prisoners were especially clear-cut. Relationships and treatment in the segregation unit were good, but were predicated on prisoners accepting their subordinate status.

members as out-of-touch and self-interested. As was the case across the service (Bennett and Wahidin 2008), most officers joined the union for benefits relating to insurance, legal representation and financial services advice rather than for political purposes. Many felt more loyal to their wing colleagues than to the uniformed force as a whole. Older officers begrudged this absence of team spirit and camaraderie. Some attributed this to government legislation that had made industrial action illegal, and to the fragmentation of staff interests (*ibid.*). In particular, they resented the growing number of 'nine-to-fivers' whose interests differed from those of shift-working wing officers. Others blamed younger officers who they saw as more individualistic than veteran staff and more compliant in the face of management power.

The lack of solidarity was reflected in the willingness of officers to extend their working hours in order to stem staff shortages, and in the frequency with which some uniformed staff 'went sick' to shirk work or obtain time off. Both were individualistic responses which undermined the potential for collective resistance and only exacerbated the staffing crisis for colleagues. As staff bitterness increased, the POA had become an influential mouthpiece, but it had insufficient influence to persuade officers to sacrifice personal for collective goals. Most officers had little faith that the union could take on the muscle of senior managers. Nationally, the mood was similar, as the threat of privatization pushed the POA and the Prison Service management board into a state of 'uneasy partnership' (Bennett and Wahidin 2008).

Officers were aware that it was their lack of united resistance, and their individual decisions to patch up a leaking system, that sustained their frustrations. Many were conflicted by this knowledge and by the tensions between personal and professional loyalties:

Take contracted hours: there are some that say we shouldn't be doing them because it's making the prison worse.<sup>23</sup> If you're coming in doing extra hours, you're actually helping the prison to continue to run even though we're short of staff. There are others that believe, 'well, this extra money is actually helping my life become better; it's helping my day to day life become easier, and therefore, if it's there legitimately, there's no reason

<sup>23</sup> 'Contracted hours': a scheme by which staff could agree to work beyond their normal hours for extra pay.

why I shouldn't be doing it'. I'm in agreement that if there are people that are helping the system run by doing contracted hours, [managers] might never feel that they should put the officers in place to do the job. But I also agree that as the head of a household it's up to me to earn what I can, to provide for my family, so if I've got the time and ability to do extra hours and earn extra money, I think that nobody should be standing in my way for me to do it.

Significantly, most decisions to extend contracted hours resulted from commitments to personal earnings rather than loyalty to the establishment or the Prison Service.

The POA also had little influence on many everyday decisions. As Chapter 4 explains in more detail, individual wing staff had considerable discretion and responsibility, but relatively little collective influence to set policy, determine the regime or make operational decisions. Power lay elsewhere: with the security department, which dominated decision-making on work allocations, cell searches and transfers from the prison ('they're the ones with the knowledge, they're getting all the sexy information all the time'); with the detail office ('cos they're holding what people need'); and with the governors and 'money-men' who, in the eyes of the uniformed workforce, held sway over landing life while being sheltered from its realities:

Half-way through the month we've got no toilet rolls. Why? Because some civvy has made a decision [that] it would cut costs. We've got to provide them with bedding, clothing and all the other things that they need, to be told we haven't got any. Why not? Because the head finance man said we can't keep them on the shelf. So what am I supposed to give him? Is the head finance man going to come down and tell these guys they can't have them? Well, no he isn't, [he's] in his office. It's okay sitting up there and saying we've got to save £1,000 this month, we'll save it by not having any towels, except that the knock-on of that is me and my staff have to fight the inmate who we can't give any towels to, because he rightly thinks he's entitled to them. (senior officer)

Wing staff believed that decisions about resources were foisted upon them without consultation or consideration. On most operational issues, they were powerless to act without consulting their superiors. To place a violent or vulnerable prisoner in the segregation unit required permission from a principal officer, for example. Such measures were interpreted as signs of management mistrust and indifference.

Only the most senior uniformed rank had sufficient authority to make decisions that had collective consequences for prisoners, as one principal officer identified:

The prisoners know the rank system—I'm the one that's got the power to make their life a misery and make their life not a misery. [I can] close the association room, whereas the officers have not got the authority to do that, because the first thing the governor will say is 'who told you to do that?'

Thus, power was formally located at the higher end of the organization. Yet principal officers described an absence of power and leadership: 'no-one's running the place. There's no real power anywhere. There's little bit of power pockets all over the place, but no-one is taking the bull by the horns and saying "right, let's drive this way".'

### *Power, authority, and staff-prisoner relationships*

The main problems that officers reported related not to prisoners, but to senior managers, the Prison Service and the political context. Even without the acute staff shortages that affected Wellingborough during the time of study, officers would have been more concerned with national issues (such as pay and status) than the demands of managing prisoners. Indeed, in the eyes of all staff, the great majority of prisoners were highly submissive. 'I've never met a more compliant bunch of prisoners than we've got here', one governor declared. Another described prisoners as 'very, very compliant'. Staff who had worked in other establishments commented that officers who complained about working life at Wellingborough had no idea what work in other prisons could be like, in terms of heavy workloads, management 'bullying', and difficulties with prisoners.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, there was no doubt that officers in Wellingborough felt powerless and demoralized: 'at breaking point: ... overworked and underpaid and overstretched' (senior officer).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> As one officer said: 'it does make me cringe sometimes when I see the lads in reception here and the workload that they [complain about]: "oh, we're snowed under with this".'

<sup>25</sup> The same senior officer reported that members of his team were crying in the wing office at least twice a week. There were reports of tearful breakdowns among at least three middle managers during my period of fieldwork.

The consequences were manifold. Their weak collective power meant that officers did not feel over-confident, and were not offhand or dismissive with prisoners. 'They manage [them] rather than barking orders at them', observed one principal officer. In this respect, staff powerlessness contributed to the informal nature of staff-prisoner relations. However, as staff became disillusioned they turned increasingly to formal means of using authority. Prisoners were steered into using written applications ('apps') for complaints that could have been dealt with in person. Meanwhile, officers side-stepped their formal duties, passing responsibilities up the institutional hierarchy, as Jim Lewis explained:

Something might come straight up to me as an application for a prisoner to go on release for something. It's my decision [ultimately] whether he goes or not, but the prisoner should have made an application for that, [which] should have generated an application form for that releasing licence. [That] should have been written up by his personal officer, there should have been a security report on it, [and] some indication of what the need was for the leave period, and then that should have been considered by a board and the board should have made the recommendation, and *then* I would have considered the outcome. Instead I was getting it first hand and having to send back for all of those things.

Officers also became increasingly reactive, reporting prisoner activity rather than supervising it. One governor was dumb-founded to receive a security report from an officer noting his suspicions about the presence of 'hooch' [illicitly-brewed alcohol] in a cell—something that could have been handled directly through a cell-search. When officers did come across disciplinary infractions, they used formal authority with inappropriate zeal, giving prisoners 'strikes' instead of using discretion.<sup>26</sup> Such mechanisms maximized punitive 'effectiveness' with minimal effort and bureaucracy, as one officer explained:

If I'd nicked him on adjudication, he'd get a caution, which is done and finished with, or he'll get a stoppage of half a canteen for one week and it's finished. If this guy's going to be an arsehole over a period of time, as opposed to getting seven or eight nicks where nothing's happening to him or he's losing half his canteen, you give him three strikes and he'll be put on basic for twenty-eight days, which means he's locked up more obviously [and he] loses his telly. It's a bigger punishment, it hurts them

<sup>26</sup> A 'strike': an official behaviour warning. In Wellingborough, a prisoner who received three strikes moved down one privilege level on the IEP scheme.

more. Rightly or wrongly we have to use whatever we can to try and get at them. So yeah, the staff here won't nick inmates for what they used to nick them for six months ago, but they'll strike them instead. It's not worth the paperwork.

In part, this kind of officer behaviour related to the removal from governors of the power to add extra days to prisoners' sentences. This authority had been passed to independent external adjudicators, in whose judgment (i.e. severity) officers had little faith. It also indicated the petty, sometimes vindictive use of authority, particularly on the VTU, where prisoners received strikes for very minor infringements such as putting up makeshift curtains or picking food from meal trays before returning to their cells.<sup>27</sup> Each of these examples indicated an absence of strong line management and a deficit in healthy authority on the prison's landings.

In summary, while officers maintained relatively relaxed relations with prisoners, feelings of resignation led them to disengage from interpersonal work and resort to formal power to manage the wings. Retreat was a way of resisting managerial authority and offsetting feelings of powerlessness. In effect, officers embraced the role of the faceless turnkey that they felt the job had become, and did so in ways that undermined institutional aims. Elsewhere, resistance was more active. In some instances, it involved the illegitimate use of formal rules and procedures. One senior officer advised a prisoner who was demanding to see a governor (in order to sort out his gym sessions) that the only way this was possible was if he was sent to the prison's segregation unit, which would require him to refuse to 'bang up'.<sup>28</sup> Another form of resistance was to pursue institutional goals via illegitimate means, as illustrated in the following example:

The governor rings me up and says: 'I need some paperwork done' [for prisoners]. But I'm not able to give the officer time to do that. Personal officer time is not profiled for in this prison. But we still are expected to

<sup>27</sup> The rule that prisoners could not eat on the landings had been made on health and safety grounds to stop prisoners from eating their entire meals in communal areas. Its aim was not to ban *any* kind of eating in these areas.

<sup>28</sup> This was advice which intensely irritated his colleagues in the segregation unit, who had to do the paperwork for a prisoner who did not need to be there. It also made life more difficult for colleagues on his wing, who were faced with many more prisoners threatening to refuse to enter their cells in order to get an audience with the governor.

do all these forms [otherwise] you start getting upset prisoners who're putting request and complaints in, and eventually it'll probably come back to me. [So] basically we cook the books, I've closed X-Wing and Y-Wing down in [recent months] to get urgent paperwork done. The governor doesn't know...

*So once you've let everyone off to work and education...*

... Yeah, the rest just stay locked up. In the evening we have activity patrols, so we'll cancel one of the activity patrols—you've got some urgent paperwork to get done, stay on the wing and get it done and we'll cover a different way. Basically we're cutting corners all the time, we're making a bad system work.

Both examples were acts where uniformed staff circumvented approved procedures to meet ends that they felt were otherwise unachievable. Both also exploited—and illuminated—the distance between management goals and those of its frontline representatives. The examples were interesting for other reasons: the first because it represented a form of collusion between uniformed staff and prisoners; the second because, in 'making a bad system work', it perpetuated the very system to which staff were opposed.

## **Collusion, Accommodation, and the Ironies of Power**

Overcrowding and staff discontent placed considerable strain on Wellingborough's functions and relationships.<sup>29</sup> Prisoners felt neglected, and were deeply frustrated at the lack of personal officer time. Despite Lewis's commitment to curtailing the regime as little as possible, wings could not always be staffed for evening exercise or association. The need to have officers in core positions also meant that important but expendable activities such as group-based drug work, induction talks, and resettlement interviews were often cancelled. Despite such issues—and despite what officers suspected was the premature categorization of Cat-B prisoners as Cat-Cs to make room further up the system—Wellingborough

<sup>29</sup> By the time of the study, the prison was receiving around twenty prisoners per week—a higher turnover than Cat-Cs were designed to manage. In the past, prisoners had only been eligible to come to Wellingborough if they had more than nine months of their sentence left to run. By 2003, population pressures were such that this rule was no longer applicable.

experienced no serious or concerted control problems. Rates of staff-prisoner assaults remained very low. Minor problems had occurred when overcrowding drafts had compelled the prison to accept a large number of prisoners from the West Midlands, who were angered to be so far from home; and petitions about food quality had occasionally threatened to ignite into larger issues. In general though, most policies went publicly unchallenged. In spite of their discontent, prisoners remained—or at least appeared—highly compliant.

Officers were proud of their ability to defuse prisoner frustrations and manage under difficult circumstances. Yet, in talking up the imminence of prisoner revolt while also quelling it, they highlighted a paradox. Dissent and disturbances were highly undesirable for officers, for anger would be directed against them or they would be its frontline victims. Yet in the absence of visible resistance—if the prison remained ostensibly calm, despite lower staffing—staff complaints were less likely to be taken seriously.

Without effective outlets, officer discontent was expressed in collusive forms. When wing staff had to tell prisoners that evening association was cancelled, they made a point of disclaiming responsibility for the decision. Explanations on wing notice boards brusquely cited staff shortages, pointing an accusatory finger at management. When prisoners expressed annoyance, officers openly endorsed their feelings and vented their own frustrations. These actions testified to the shared interests of those who worked the landings and those who lived on them. They also illustrated a sentiment shared by staff and prisoners that the world beyond the wings was indifferent to their concerns and stacked against their interests. Like prisoners, many officers described themselves as treated like ‘numbers’ rather than individuals, and saw the prison as a place that rewarded you only ‘if your face fits’.<sup>30</sup>

As Phil Wheatley had noted in his speech to the Cat-C conference, some prisoners spoke out on behalf of the plight of officers. They did so not only for reasons of self-interest (i.e. because they suffered when officers were stretched), but because they identified

<sup>30</sup> Sharing a physical and cultural location, officers also appropriated strands of prisoner language to depict their working conditions. Thus, they emphasized the need to ‘front’ in order to stop others from ‘taking liberties’, and described colleagues who left work through stress as ‘fraggled out’ (see Chapter 6).

with the stresses that officers conveyed. 'In some instances', summarized one governor, 'it's them against us—prisoners *and* staff'.

As another governor acknowledged, such alliances were inadvertently promoted by target culture:

The wings are perhaps the most easily ignored area, because we don't get problems from them, because the prisoners are compliant, and because the auditor says we've got the right posters in the right places and the right ticks in the right boxes. So actually it's all too easy to forget the wings, to forget the staff on them, to forget their lot.

There were other examples of this mutual sympathy and interest. When food was substandard, or when handed-in items were slow to be passed on to prisoners, officers encouraged prisoners to lodge official grievances. These were failures of service-delivery, which prisoners felt were not the responsibility of officers.<sup>31</sup> Prisoners and wing staff recognized that, in many respects, neither had the capacity to solve the problems that most exercised the other.

### *Governors and power*

In the eyes of wing staff, Wellingborough was 'a governors' jail—the POA have got nothing here' (senior officer). Yet, just as officers argued that power resided in the upper branches of the institution, governors reported that their main problems and frustrations derived from the organizational world above them. In part, these were financial constraints over which governors had little control. One explained his feeling that budget cuts were increasingly undermining the aims of senior management and changing the nature of the job, turning it into an exercise in creative butchery:

We've gone through the meat, we've gone through the fat, we've gone through the bone, we're now into the bone marrow, but [The Centre is] still expecting us to make year on year savings. Whatever saving we make something's got to go. You can only do a set amount of work with a certain amount of resources.

Lewis highlighted similar pressures. He had 'a great deal of discretion in running the establishment', but felt that this was diminishing. A growing part of the prison's budget was hypothecated for

<sup>31</sup> It should be said, however, that these problems were more often the fault of officers than prisoners realized. Some officers claimed helplessness because it was easier to do so than to resolve problems.

specific services, such as offending behaviour programmes, education, and drug treatment. At the same time, managerial expectations meant that, while his financial and operational discretion contracted, the pressure on him to deliver was heightened. The Prison Service was also ‘increasingly demanding of *particular ways* of doing things’, requiring that offending behaviour programmes were homogenous and accredited, and imposing orders and instructions from above on all manner of policies and practices. The ease with which performance data could be accessed held governors to account for their failures while limiting their room for manoeuvre (Carlen 2005). Financial limits, then, were coupled with restrictions on the nature and scope of management. Accountability and responsibility were high, but autonomy was limited.

For governors, the experience of power was highly ambivalent, as one member of the senior management team indicated:

On a day-to-day basis, I have enormous power. I’m the arbiter on whether or not a member of staff gets an order to extend [their shift], or whether ninety prisoners are locked up involuntarily. [But] I don’t know strategically if I have that much power at all. My job is in making sure that the Governor’s strategy is being relayed and being delivered. I know the route we’re taking. [But] I don’t feel that I’ve got any power at all to influence that. We’re not in a position to say ‘pull back’.

Several points merit expansion. There was an important distinction between the everyday power wielded by governors and their capacity to define the shape, direction, and uses of this power. Governors (and principal officers) had *operational* responsibility for decisions of great significance for those below them, and the prison’s hierarchical structure meant that they often felt extremely commanding. Yet they did not hold enough political or *allocative* power (Murdock 1982) to alter the general terms by which the institution functioned. One governor believed that he could ‘at a stroke, cure most of the ills of this prison, if I was given my target staffing figure’. Without such power, and operating under such constraints, the governing role was one of technical management as much as professional expertise. The job description was ‘almost robotic: [it] says to manage this area of the prison to the best of my capability’ (governor). As is suggestive of Foucault (1977), power operated *through* personnel at all levels. For both governors and officers,

as much as power was exercised, it often felt 'elsewhere' and was never truly in their possession.

With so much power being channelled through them, governors felt in highly invidious positions. One described himself as being 'under siege, from all quarters', with officers and senior managers asserting conflicting demands and both groups looking to him to resolve them. Lewis conveyed deep frustration about being held to account for issues over which he had little control:

I do think that it's unfair that people blame me for us not having enough staff because I've been recruiting as fast as I possibly can do. But people feel frustrated and they have to vent their frustration somewhere, and where do you vent it? It's not the senior officer's fault and it's not the principal officer's fault and it's not the visits' [staff] fault, it must be the governor's fault, you know. It's certainly the governor's responsibility [even] if it's not the governor's fault. I have railed against some of those things as well, and have railed against the fact that I've not got a settled team here.

*But you're not cross with anyone in particular?*

No. There is nobody for you to be cross with.

Lewis's declaration of powerlessness resonated in striking ways with prisoners' complaints about the elusiveness and anonymity of penal power, as coming chapters will show. It illustrated the way that, as for officers, managerialism could feel harsh and oppressive to those who were its institutional representatives. More importantly, for current purposes, it captured the constrained agency of the governor's role. Like officers, governors felt that they bore a disproportionate level of responsibility relative to their autonomy. They too sometimes appealed to prisoners to understand their predicament, as one governor explained in relation to evening exercise:

We knew that we would never be able to sustain it, we tried to build on the good relationships between staff and prisoners here and say 'look, you know we're short staffed, you know that we find it difficult to do things, but we're going to make this effort and we can't do it all the time, but we will do it whenever we can'. And most people seem to have taken to that, and we've had to cancel on a number of occasions and there's not been a great backlash against it, because I think [there's] an acceptance that that's the way of the world and we're doing what we can.

Such pleas for empathy indicated the possibility of understanding between prisoners and their custodians. But the supplication of

governors to prisoners was born of weakness, not the search for normative consensus as such. At the same time, it pointed to an alliance of interests within the institution: not divisions between different strata in the prison, but a line of division between the institution and the world above it.

Even the governor most committed to the performance agenda described his need to function in bad faith: 'I'm paid to get on with this and even the bits that I don't like, the Brussels sprouts on the plate, I've got to eat. There's lots of Brussels sprout eating that we have to do.' Governors felt bound by corporate responsibility to implement the orders of their seniors regardless of personal reservations and frustrations about resourcing. Not least, they recognized that their seniors were as constrained as they were in setting the agenda for their actions. Moreover, governors were no less pragmatic about their professional actions than officers, and knew that defiance was not indulged:

If I was to say, 'no, this is stupid and we're not doing it', then they would simply move me out and put someone else in.

I think you have to be in line with the performance culture because it's the only game in town. If you were in a governing position and you didn't play their game, you wouldn't remain in the governing position for very long.

Despite their frustrations and reservations, then, governors were highly compliant in the face of managerial power.

This acquiescence had some ironic qualities. Wellingborough's governors had been so successful in managing the POA into submission that they had diminished the capacity to achieve their own ends. Like officers, without organized pressure from below, managers could not illustrate to their seniors that their claims to need more staff were valid:

I have at numerous times over the year had to prop up the POA and say 'challenge me over this will you, and I'll give ground'. The POA could and should be doing [things] that would influence a Governor and force their hand and still allow a Governor to keep corporate responsibility. It [should] be very difficult to champion an argument that says Wellingborough [should] be sending someone to Ashwell prison this week to help sustain the regime there, when we're twelve officers short *here*. Yet the POA aren't challenging us over it. The Area Manager will see that the POA aren't challenging it, therefore it's obviously not perceived as a problem here. They

should have ‘failed to agree’ over it and said, ‘you’re not doing it and we want a consultation process’, but they didn’t.

As suggested here, by running the prison ‘effectively’ (i.e. keeping within the budget, meeting targets, maintaining the regime), and fulfilling a particular vision of institutional success, governors could perpetuate problems that edged beneath the managerialist radar, and could foment frustrations that would return to haunt them.<sup>32</sup> They were also placed in positions where they were disliked by staff for imposing agendas whose flaws they were well aware of.

The distribution of power in Wellingborough made it possible for governors to suppress staff discontent, or push it into forms (such as staff sickness) that remained ‘managerial’ rather than systemic problems. It was difficult to envisage resourcing issues being challenged or negotiated without a corporate, consensual, or collusive approach to industrial relations. These issues could not be resolved within the institution itself—indeed, many could not easily be resolved by the Prison Service at all—and required power to be exerted outside the establishment. But the divergence of interests between governors and uniformed staff made such strategies difficult. For governors, meeting targets within budget was the *sine qua non* of their employment, and this generally meant minimizing staff costs. For officers, targets were false idols. To them, ‘failing prisons’ seemed to benefit more than establishments that successfully struggled to meet official expectations or effectively performed high-performance. As one senior officer complained:

If we lock down a wing because of staff shortages, the area manager has to be notified. We don’t do that. So they think everything’s wonderful. Littlehey loses one member of staff and closes down a wing. We lose five and somehow manage by swapping shifts and coming in. Littlehey will be given extra funding for more staff, Littlehey will be given probably overtime. We don’t get any of this because somehow we cope, and the fact that we cope is a great credit to us. We manage to keep the lid on it, [but] because we keep the lid on it we’re going to be punished.

For those officers who saw targets being met while the prison’s spirit and procedures crumbled, failure appeared a more desirable option.

<sup>32</sup> As with uniformed staff, the human costs of this situation were apparent. Asked to recall his last good day at work during the previous few weeks, one governor replied that he would struggle to identify ‘a good moment’.

## Conclusion

The first aim of this chapter has been to provide a description of Wellingborough's institutional culture and staff attitudes, and to explore how power was distributed between and experienced by governors and uniformed staff. It has suggested that, despite their enormous capacity to determine the quality of prison life for prisoners, uniformed staff did not perceive themselves to be powerful figures in institutional life. As a group, they were demoralized and fragmented. Managerial reforms had winched power to higher levels of the organization, eroding their collective influence. Many officers felt un-trusted, out of touch with institutional aims, and alienated from organizational decision-making. Cynicism about management motives and methods was widespread. Resentment was partly based on a feeling that managers cared more about prisoner wellbeing than staff concerns, and were fixated on (what were considered) abstract and meaningless 'targets' while indifferent to the nature of the 'real work' that took place on the landings. Many frontline staff were also bitter about discrepancies between the rhetoric and realities of penal ambitions. Overcrowding and taut resourcing exacerbated a perception that expectations were unachievable. Despite the considerable discretion that they were able to wield, most uniformed staff felt increasingly rule-bound, constrained by rigid lines of accountability, formalized procedures, 'human rights' and grievance procedures. In the absence of effective collective means of channelling their views and frustrations, these staff expressed their discontent by disengaging from interpersonal work or going sick—forms of resistance that disadvantaged their own co-workers, as well as prisoners and senior managers.

In spite of their authority and influence, governors felt little more autonomous and barely more in control of the institutional agenda. Most highlighted an important distinction between the high levels of responsibility and accountability they carried and the shrinking autonomy of their role in a context where control, oversight, and audit were increasingly centralized (see Bryans 2007). They were managed lightly, but their agency was highly constrained by the knowledge that they could act only within certain parameters. For senior managers as well as staff, it felt as though power resided above them, and seemed that they had to shoulder organizational problems and emotional expectations whose solutions were beyond their control. Governors also shared with the uniformed workforce

the sense that it was increasingly difficult to meet management demands without compromising some aspects of quality. Like them, they often claimed to be managed with little organizational sympathy, and felt that their options to challenge their seniors and assert their views were highly circumscribed. In the belief that resisting the management agenda was futile unless they could wield the discontent of another party—ideally, one whose concerns would enter the field of vision of senior Prison Service managers—they were highly compliant in following organizational goals.

Ultimately, and ironically, therefore, governors and officers felt equally disempowered by the absence of visible discontent among *prisoners*. These pervasive feelings of powerlessness were intensified by the knowledge that, by coping in difficult circumstances, one's problems were more likely to be perpetuated than resolved. All parties felt complicit in their own disgruntlement. As the chapters that follow will show, there were striking parallels between these feelings of resigned self-management among staff and those expressed by prisoners. In terms of sympathies, allegiance and conflict, the prison was jointed and dislocated in unexpected ways, with deceptive fissures and connections.

Uniformed staff expressed as much hostility and cynicism about governors as they did about prisoners (see Liebling 2004), with whom they shared space and developed tacit alliances through a shared perception of managerial neglect. Likewise, governors spent more time managing staff than prisoners. It was extremely difficult to maintain a positive relationship with uniformed staff while promoting a vision for the establishment that was implicitly critical of their position. The culture among officers was a hindrance to governors' moral ambitions, but alienating uniformed staff risked making things worse.

Although they were conditioned by the prison's specific institutional history, these patterns and problems also reflected more generic characteristics of the times. Across the system, schisms between governors and uniformed staff were the norm rather than the exception.<sup>33</sup> As in most prisons in the early years of the decade, Wellingborough's management turnover was rapid and its priorities changed frequently. In some prisons, POA

<sup>33</sup> In some prisons, governors report that some officers blank them or audibly call them 'wankers' when they walk around the wings.

committees retained the collective power that had elsewhere been siphoned to higher echelons of the organization, but the collective disunity of Wellingborough's uniformed staff mirrored general, national tendencies (Bennett and Wahidin 2008). It also reflected long-term shifts in the nature of prison management (Liebling 2004; Carlen 2005). Centralized control had been tightened in part because of the moral deficiencies and abuses that a less firmly managed system had allowed in previous decades. Senior managers justified increased scrutiny and accountability by arguing that imprisonment, more than other domains, necessitated rather autocratic management, not so much of prisoners but staff. Inevitably though, the layers of audit that this view produces can imply a lack of faith in the expertise of professionals, who often felt restricted, controlled, and disempowered even while they recognized the benefits of oversight. As Foucault (1977) argued, the supervisors as well as the supervised are under surveillance, disciplined and enmeshed by the system of power.

This chapter's second aim has been to show how institutional culture and dynamics gave shape to staff-prisoner relations and determined how power was exercised on prisoners. Wellingborough's culture was largely benign, and staff sought to use relationships rather than more coercive strategies in the service of order. Officers were not provocative or intrusive in their use of power. In this respect, it was a relatively easy prison in which to 'do time'. However, it was a less good place in which to get things done. Wellingborough was not a dynamic prison, in which staff took initiative or had a wider vision of service-delivery. Prisoners received little help as well as little hassle. Nor was it an establishment in which authority was always used with confidence. Practices were rather casual, and relaxed relationships concealed an underbelly of disdain, indifference, and moral superciliousness. As staff morale dropped, these sentiments surfaced. Decent relationships had lacked a solid normative basis, and their foundations were shallow. Officers retreated to their offices and resorted increasingly to the use of formal power rather than interpersonal discretion. As the next chapter explains, compliance was not achieved through either technique alone, but through a range of power strategies that combined in practice to form a distinctive arrangement of power.