

Revelations of dysfunctional governance in Wandsworth Prison are a reflection of the precariousness of bureaucratic arrangements throughout the public sector and their potential to unravel

Last Wednesday's resoundingly critical report on HMP Wandsworth by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Nick Hardwick, found evidence of severe deficiencies in many aspects of the prison's management, staff culture, conditions and regimes. The report is now especially prescient given that London's prisons were 'filled to capacity' after the recent riots. [Simon Bastow](#) argues that this is a stark reminder of how governance dysfunction can remain latent in a public sector system, while at the same time, can appear to be gradually improving.



An inspection in June 2009 surfaced evidence of the prison swapping difficult inmates with Pentonville in order to make Wandsworth look better for the inspectors. Described as a 'subversion' of the inspection process, the saga gave a brief glimpse of the 'pragmatics' involved in running prisons in a managerialist era.

It is interesting however that had this scandal not come to light, the focus of the 2009 report would, by its own admission, have been very different. [As the opening paragraph stated](#), it would have been about 'continuing progress and improvement in a prison that has, in the past, been the source of considerable concern'. Since 2006, senior management had done much to deal with 'resistant staff culture, increase the quality and quantity of activities, and improve prisoners' resettlement chances'.

Less than two years later, it is disconcerting that the latest inspection reads as a catalogue of governance failures in the prison, which bring to mind an era of local prisons of the mid-1990s rather than the early 2010s. Wednesday's report highlighted demeaning and unsafe treatment and conditions, unwillingness among managers and staff to acknowledge and take responsibility for problems, lack of any kind of strategic approach to well-established issues such as foreign national prisoners, high levels of self-harm and self-inflicted deaths, and poor staff-prisoner relations.

Various threads of evidence help us to understand how it was that the public sector system allowed one of its largest local prisons to unravel so spectacularly in a relatively short period of time.

The 2009 annual report by the [Wandsworth Independent Monitoring Board \(IMB\)](#) point to a combination of factors which destabilized top-down management stability in the period after the 2009 inspection. Wandsworth was without a 'governing governor' between June and October 2009. In March 2010, four experienced governors left the prison and were not replaced. And in the meantime, key senior officer-grade posts were abolished as part of streamlining measures across the whole system, thus destabilizing further operational aspects of management.

The IMB report also documents the influence on staff in the prison, reflected in high levels of staff sickness during the first quarter of 2010. Pressure in the prison was increased also by a doubling in the year after the 2009 inspection in the number of self-inflicted deaths in the prison, as well as further deterioration in basic administrative processing of prisoner requests and applications. Serious assaults increased to the highest they had been throughout the 2000s, and the ability of regimes to deliver 'purposeful activity' and 'time out of cell' reduced to the lowest.

Under such circumstances, it should not be surprising that 'benign resistance' amongst staff and managers would surface, and that such attitudes would in themselves become prevalent and work against attempts to re-impose order or optimism. Neither is it surprising that in one of the largest urban local prisons, pockets of staff recalcitrance and 'bad culture' would re-emerge to fill a void. Indeed, Wandsworth prison has long had a reputation, along with others, for having a strong POA union influence which, as one official explained to me,



has 'been able to do as it pleases over the years'.

It is perhaps in the nature of prisons and their performance over the decades that they have lurched through cycles of 'coping to crisis to reform'. We might interpret the Wandsworth situation as simply just another rotation through the cycle. Indeed, the culture of response from Prison Service headquarters has been to fetishize the impact of new leadership. As one governor fails another 'hot shot' is brought in to fix the situation. The Wandsworth report suggests that there are systemic limits to what new leadership can realistically achieve in this respect.



No, it appears that the Wandsworth report reflects something more than just running through the familiar cycle. What is disturbing is the way in which the prison system as a whole can appear to be performing relatively well (and indeed, lay reasonable claim to this), yet at the same time, be shown to be 'incubating' and allowing governance arrangements to unravel so dramatically in one of its largest and busiest establishments.

What might be the implications of this for Wandsworth and the prison system? As the Table below shows, Wandsworth is the biggest local prison in the system, yet if it is unable to respond to the criticisms made in yesterday's report, it may find itself facing the threat of being transferred to private sector management. The Ministry of Justice has made the leap with Birmingham already this year, and one could imagine that this could be followed by a London prison at some point in the next few years.

Top 10 largest local prisons in England and Wales, August 2011

	In use Certified Normal Accommo dation	Total population	
Wandsworth	1,107	1,598	Public sector
Birmingham	1,088	1,463	Soon to be private sector G4S
Forest Bank (Salford)	1,064	1,321	Private sector Kalyx
Liverpool	1,157	1,262	Public sector
Wormwood Scrubs	1,176	1,261	Public sector
Pentonville	909	1,233	Public sector
Altcourse (Liverpool)	794	1,220	Private sector G4S
Manchester	949	1,195	Public sector (SLA)
Parc (Cardiff)	838	1,141	Private sector G4S
Leeds	809	1,112	Public sector

A cynic might recognize in all of this some kind of concealed attempt to 'prepare' Wandsworth for sacrifice to the private sector. This critical report from the Inspector and further deterioration of standards might well give the Ministry a basis for taking on the POA in this respect. Even a cynic would have to acknowledge, however, that the scale of likely battle involved for the government in taking on the POA in one of their strongest jails would have already made ministers think twice about going ahead with this so soon after Birmingham.

It is more likely that Wednesday's revelations about Wandsworth Prison are not part of any elaborate conspiracy, but rather a straightforward reflection of the precariousness of governance arrangements in public sector systems, and the potential for them to unravel if they are not continually nurtured.

For the prison system to be considered a successful or high performing system (and there is no reason in my view why it should not be), it does not seem adequate that it should be able to incorporate such major

cases of governance dysfunction. New Public Management (NPM) has perhaps given the system both a way to focus on and demonstrate its own performance improvements. Yet it has also paradoxically given the system a way to sustain its own governance frailties.

As Wandsworth itself began to illustrate in the three years leading up to the 2009 saga, it takes time and concerted effort to bring about positive change in 'total institutional' environments. It also illustrates that it does not take long for this to unravel and leave both those in the system and those watching from the outside dazed and confused, and wondering what on earth happened.