THE BARLINNIE SPECIAL UNIT – A STUDY IN SOCIAL CONTROL

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The Special Unit in Barlinnie Prison in Glasgow has attracted considerable attention as a rare example of a successful and progressive prison regime. The unique feature of the Special Unit – now extended with some minor difference to an additional new Unit opened at Shotts prison in central Scotland – is that it has evolved as what may be termed a participatory community in which both inmates and staff together determine what is to happen – how the unit is to be run on a day-to-day basis, which new inmates are to be accepted and what forms of behaviour are to be tolerated. This is, perhaps, especially surprising given that the essential task of both Units is to deal with long-term prisoners who in some way (very often by violent behaviour) have been a serious control problem while incarcerated.

In this paper I wish to reflect on these Special Units, particularly the Barlinnie one, to assess what can be learned from their example. My argument is that these Units provide a case study of a workable prison regime that appears to be successful in dealing with control problems in a manner which is less dehumanising than many other similarly intensive, but more openly restrictive and repressive ones. In this sense, not only are these Units to be welcomed on grounds of both humanity and efficiency, but they may also have wider relevance. At one level, their relevance lies in providing a (perhaps) very special model of how other, long-term prisoners may be dealt with and, beyond this, of how it is possible to administer prison populations in a way which is both secure yet sensitive to the quality of human relationships. At another, more abstract level, these Units, I suggest, are relevant to the now vast but ever growing body of literature on the sociology of the prison. I wish to ask two questions on this literature, first, how can it help us to make sense of the Special Units and second, how does an understanding of the Units further develop the sociology of imprisonment and, by extension, the sociology of punishment and social control.

Before elaborating these more general points, there is, however, a need to set the scene by describing more fully the penal context in which the Special Units first emerged. How and why did the Barlinnie Unit come into existence? It is necessary for me also to paint a more detailed picture of the nature of the regime; why did the regime evolve as what I have called a 'participatory community'? What does this mean in practice? Was this regime intended by the designers of the Special Unit or had its evolution more to do with the internal, local dynamics of the Barlinnie Unit once it was established?

These are the questions I intend to consider, but it must be emphasised there is a central obstacle to the provision of detailed and full answers. This obstacle is the lack of research and therefore reliable information on the Units. Since its establishment in 1973, there has been no research commissioned or allowed on the

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Barlinnie Unit. We possess some general accounts of the history of the Barlinnie Unit which I shall use, but there exists no independent empirical research on the nature of the regime itself.[1] Prisons Division of the Scottish Office, the government body administratively responsible for penal establishments, has recently commissioned a number of English criminologists to undertake a study, but as matters stand, the evidence we have of how these Units work has come mostly from accounts written by ex-inmates and to a lesser extent from those written by prison officers and from other 'impressionistic' descriptions given by visitors (I have visited both Units). The strange failure of the Scottish Office in the past to either commission or allow research thus has meant that the meaning of the Barlinnie Special Unit – of how its regime works and what the regime is like – has been defined essentially by ex-inmates – and in particularly through the two books and other pronouncements of Jimmy BOYLE (BOYLE, 1997; BOYLE, 1984) – and to a lesser extent by ex-staff.

This is an unusual situation which, of itself, has added to the reputation, even the sense of 'specialness', that has surrounded the Barlinnie Unit. To the neutral observer, it is as if the Scottish Office was first taken by surprise by the successes claimed for the Unit and the publicity this generated and then subsequently lost control of the flow of information – a rare example of a political and administrative 'failure' in an governmental system otherwise known for its secrecy and near monopoly of this crucial commodity. One consequence of this is that, until recently, the Scottish Office view of the Special Unit has exhibited ambiguity and ambivalence. At one level there has been a commendable openness, both in terms of the granting of access to visitors and especially in allowing publication of the first of BOYLE's books (which contains a vivid an deeply critical account of the Scottish prison system as a whole), but this is countered at another level, both by this failure to allow research and also to develop and issue a clear and elaborate policy statement on the significance of the Unit. Rather, for a lengtly period of time, the Barlinnie Unit was described as 'experimental'. Of course, in one sense, this was literally true; the Barlinnie Unit has been a brave experiment in prison regimes for which the Scottish Office deserves praise; but, to the outsider, including the research community, this description itself served more to mystify than to enlighten. The use of the term seemed to invite, indeed to necessitate research, yet such proposals as were made were not accepted.

This is not the place to go, in any great depth, into the issues, although I shall have to return to them from time to time. Rather, it is probably best to see both the Scottish Office policy towards the Barlinnie Unit and the few accounts we possess as aspects of an interesting case study in the ambiguous politics of prison reform and management. For my purposes, as was said, its immediate relevance lies in the lack of genuine research studies on the regime. It is not that information, especially on the background to the Unit, is lacking completely; it is more that the information we do have must itself be seen as part of this politics and thus, in an important sense, as provisional and qualified.

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1. There has been one small scale study of the Special Unit conducted by David Cooke who is a clinical psychologist working, part-time, in the Unit. This research seems to have flowed from his professional involvement in the Unit; as far as I can tell he was not commissioned to undertake the research (D.J. COOKE, 1989).

The Emergence of the Barlinnie Special Unit

1. THE WIDER PENAL CONTEXT

In comparative terms, the Scottish prison system is a small one. It consists now of twenty penal establishments for young and adult offenders, one of which, Cornton Vale, is a prison for women. In an average year, these establishments will hold approximately a daily population of some 5,000 to 5,500 inmates, serving a variety of sentences from pre-trial detention, extremely short ones, to life sentences for murder and other very serious crimes. Although the proportion of inmates serving very long sentences, such as life, has increased significantly, especially since the abolition of capital punishment in 1965, most of the sentences imposed by Scottish criminal courts continue to be below six months. This is a long-term sentencing pattern or trend which can be traced as far back as the emergence of the prison in Scotland. One factor which contributes to this trend is the frequency with which fine defaulters are imprisoned; in an average year, 40% to 45% of the prison reception population will be composed of fine defaulters, many of whom will serve sentences of two months or below.

If it is examined in international terms, Scotland has a high per capita rate of imprisonment. In the figures issued by the Council of Europe, Scotland (97.4 per 100,000) regularly tops or comes second place in the league table and, if comparisons are drawn with other westernstyle penal systems, then only two countries, the U.S.A. (426 per 100,000) and Canada (112.7 per 100,000) in that order, regularly imprison more per 100,000 of their population. It should be pointed out, however, that the North American systems consistently make significantly greater use of imprisonment that is the case in all European systems. Rather, the Scottish penal system as a whole is more typically European in that the overall use of penal sanctions shows a marked reliance on fines and other financial penalties (this is true, but to a lesser extent of the U.S.A. and Canada). For example, on average, in Scotland approximately 83% of all crimes and offences are dealt with by fines and other monetary penalties, in comparison to approximately only 7% which are disposed of by imprisonment. Moreover, in terms of ist statistical frequency of use, admonition – a type of judicial warning – is used more than imprisonment in Scotland. For completeness, it ought to be noted that probation has not been used to any great extent in Scotland; indeed, until very recently the use of probation was in decline, a trend which was exacerbated by the abolition of a separate Probation Service by the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968.

The relevance of this thumb-nail sketch is that notwithstanding the over all sentencing trends described and whether it is deserved or not, the Scottish penal system has the reputation of relying, to an unusual extent, on imprisonment as a response to crime and is thus often seen as being highly punitive. Or, to put it less contentiously, the Scottish system does not have an international reputation, as, for example, do the Dutch or some of the Scandinavian systems, for being either 'liberal' or, with the possible exception of the Childrens Hearings Systems, innovative and progressive. Yet, it was in such an apparently inhospitable penal context that the Barlinnie Unit did emerge and has developed.

2. *THE BARLINNIE SPECIAL UNIT*

As with other penal developments, the establishment of the Barlinnie Unit is to be explained in terms of the contingent coming together of an number of otherwise loosely connected factors, set against a broader structural backdrop. The most important structural factors were (a) as has been noted, the small size of the Scottish prison system, meaning that only a small number of inmates were ever likely to be seen as suitable for any form of special regime; (b) the existence of a wider policy of small units, dating from the early 1950s which were set up to deal with prisoners who were considered violent and/or subversive; and (c) the then existent belief that certain forms of psychiatrically conceived therapeutic relationships were effective in dealing with such offenders and could be implemented in a suitable setting.

The contingent factors which lay behind the emergence of the Special Unit – which can be viewed as its immediate 'causes' – were first, as has been noted, the problems that were seen to arise from the recent abolition of capital punishment for murder in 1965, especially the increase this brought about in the number of prisoners serving long or life sentences. This was coupled with a notable increase in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the number of assaults on staff which culminated in a series of very serious incidents in the period before and including December 1972. As a response to this increase in assaults, and after an approach by the Scottish Prison Officers Association, the Secretary of State for Scotland set up a working party in 1970, 'to consider what arrangements should be made for the treatment of certain inmates likely to be detained in custody for very long periods or with propensities to violence towards staff' (quoted in COYLE, 1987, p. 239). The working party submitted its report in February 1971; the first of its sixteen recommendations was that, 'a Special Unit should be provided within the Scottish penal system for the treatment of known violent inmates, those considered potentially violent and selected long-term inmates' (SHHD, 1971, para. 59). Many of the recommendations were accepted by the government, and on the 5th February 1973 the proposed Special Unit opened in the former womens jail within the walls of Barlinnie Prison, Glasgow.

Shortly I will return to the report of the working party and look at its recommendations in more detail, particularly those relating to the nature of the regime. Before this, it is necessary, however, to place the proposal for the Special Unit more firmly in its penal/historical context, and in particular to locate it within the wider policy of small units mentioned above (b).

3. *THE SCOTTISH POLICY OF SMALL UNITS*

The policy of dealing with 'difficult' prisoners by establishing small units can be traced back to the 1950s. In 1951, the Annual Report of the Prisons Division, *Prisons in Scotland*, noted a new development; this was the setting up of a small Unit in one of the existing halls in Peterhead Prison in Northern Scotland. It is worth quoting from the Report at some length because its description of this Unit records many of the elements of a policy that was subsequently repeated and developed elsewhere. The Report says:

'Cases of serious indiscipline among the long-term recidivists at Peterhead could generally be traced to a small group of prisoners. Such prisoners, of whom there are seldom more than 10 in an population of about 200, are now segregated. They were treated in all respects as ordinary prisoners. An Advisory Committee which included representatives of the prison Visiting Committee and of the Department periodically reviewed the case of each prisoner and recommended his return to the main section of the prison as son as his behaviour justified it. These arrangements have raised the standard of prison morale and there has been a marked fall in the number of acts of indiscipline'.

(*Prisons in Scotland*, 1951, p. 140)

Although this particular small unit was abandoned in 1957, its importance lies partly in being the first of others which were to follow but also in that the reasoning which lay behind its establishment has continued until today; it certainly resulted in the Barlinnie example 20 years later. There are three aspects worthy of note; first, the authorities saw (and see) troublesome prisoners to be a minority; second, that the best way to deal with such prisoners is to separate them from the mainstream population; and, third, but that such prisoners would return to the mainstream at some stage and, as is the case with Barlinnie and Shotts Units today, certainly before their release into the community.

It is evident that this policy, in its turn, is based upon a number of underlying assumptions, the most far reaching of which is that the trouble caused by inmates is not systematically related to the 'normal' regime or 'ordinary' prisons. Rather, it is supposed that it can be accounted for in terms of 'special', exceptional factors whether these are related to the personality of the prisoner or to other conditions which may be present. Hence, the rationale has always been that small units respond to special needs and that a prisoner's stay in them is temporary. (It must be said that this last aspect of the policy varied considerably in practice; inmates have remained in the Barlinnie Unit for long periods.)

There is, I think, another feature of the small unit policy that the setting up of the original Peterhead Segregation Unit helps to demonstrate; particular units were established only in response to specific management problems. By this I mean that there appears never to have been any grand design or systematic forward planning lying behind the small unit policy; for instance, there appears not to have been an attempt to calculate the number or type of small units appropriate to the Scottish penal system. Rather, additional units have emerged to deal with specific problems at particular times. This was true of the Peterhead, Barlinnie and Shotts Units; in each case the Unit was set up to handle a particular issue that was perceived to be problematic at the time. The crucial factor seems to have been whether 'Headquarters', the Prisons Division, reached the conclusion – in response to a variety of pressures – that the normal, mainstream prison system could not cope. If such a consensus evolved, then at least one of the conditions for the establishment of a unit was in place. The one strong exception to this pattern of development is the Inverness Segregation Unit which was established first in 1966 as a national facility to deal with troublesome prisoners but has since had a very chequered history of temporary closure and continual controversy (often after riots, the most infamous being those in 1972; these particular riots lay behind the establishment of the Barlinnie Unit).

The Inverness Unit apart, the attitude of the Prisons Division seems to have been – and remains still – reactive rather than proactive. In this sense, it is per-

haps a little misleading to describe there being a small unit 'policy' at all, if this term is taken to imply a systematic approach to a problem based upon a number of clear principles. Instead, it is probably more accurate to characterise what has happened with these units as an example of what Andrew COYLE calls the Scottish tradition of 'pragmatic regime development' (COYLE, 1987). By this COYLE appears to mean that in Scotland, prison regimes have traditionally developed in a fairly fluid way; they have evolved, he says, by adapting to problems as they arise rather than by being based upon a set of fixed ideas.

If COYLE's account of the development of prison regimes in Scotland is taken as a general explanation then it is a little exaggerated. As he argues in a later work (COYLE, 1991), the prison system did in fact respond in a fairly systematic way to the imposition of a set of, according to him, misguided principles relating to treatment. But this apart, his work is useful in highlighting certain general features of policy development in a Scottish context. The first of these is the official vocabulary or language used. As we have seen, for many years, the official description of the Barlinnie Unit cast it as an 'experiment'; again, it is not uncommon to see the development of small units characterised by such phrases as, 'the Scottish experience' (COYLE, 1984). The use of these cautious, open-ended terms is most interesting. Although they are descriptively accurate – Barlinnie was an 'experiment' and there is a stock of 'experience' with small units – they also function, I suggest, as part of a wider, legitimatory vocabulary. The description of the Barlinnie Unit as an 'experiment', for instance, was used, not to invite systematic evaluation but to delay it. In the sense in which it has been used in official descriptions, the notion of 'experiment' achieved this purpose by implying that the Barlinnie regime was too fluid and too changeable – and therefore too indefinite – to allow evaluation. Ironically, the use of 'experiment' or 'experimental' in this context, thus worked to invoke an understanding of these terms that is the very opposite of their proper meaning. In its proper usage, the term experiment is tied to a process of intentional evaluation; the purpose of an experiment, after all, is to subject a state of affairs to a 'test' and thereby to evaluate it. Its use in official vocabulary here, however, came to mean the opposite; describing the Barlinnie Unit as an experiment came to mean putting off a 'test' to the indefinite future. Furthermore, this was reinforced by the depiction of the development of small units as an 'experience'. It is sensible and reasonable to expect a 'plan' or a 'policy' to be evaluated and justified; it is far less reasonable and sensible to expect the same of an 'experience'!

The second important feature of the way in which small units have developed is that it has led to the emergence of a considerable diversity of regimes. There now appear to be two main types of unit represented; on the one hand by the relatively liberal and open community regime at Barlinnie (which I shall describe in more detail later), contrasted, on the other hand to the far more repressive regime in the Inverness Segregation Unit.

The regime in the Inverness Unit is described as 'strict and limited'; there is no association among prisoners, recreation is limited and all meals are taken in isolation. Only one inmate is allowed out of his cell at a time and always in the presence of four or more officers. Moreover, the cells at Inverness, known also as 'cages', are unique in design in a Scottish contrext; each cell is approximately twice the size of a standard cell but is divided from ceiling to floor down the

centre by an internal grid of bars. This separates the cell into an area behind the bars, entered by a door in them, in which the prisoner is housed and into a 'sterile' area, entered by a conventional prison door. The intention is to allow the staff to inspect the prisoner without fear of being attacked.

At the moment there are four small units operating in the Scottish prison system. In addition to the Barlinnie, Shotts and Inverness Units, there is a small '6 Cell Unit' in Perth Prison. This unit opened in 1989 and is perceived as a national facility aimed at allowing long term prisoners who have been isolated from the mainstream regime to adjust prior to their return to it. Its regime differs from the other units as it allows for a high level of involvement of specialist psychological services. It is not that such services are lacking in the other units – but more that in the other units these services occupy a secondary, supporting role rather than a primary one. It was within this fluid ideological and institutional backdrop that the Barlinnie Special Unit emerged. The small size of the Scottish prison system made it likely that there would only ever be a relatively small number of inmates regarded als violent and/or difficult and that, therefore, small units were appropriate. This contrasts sharply with the then current policy in England and Wales of dispersing long-termers around the much larger number of English prisons. In addition, the existence of other small units prior to the establishment of the Barlinnie one, again, predisposed the Scottish authorities to a certain course of action – that is to set up another one, but, and this is a crucial feature, with a radically different type of regime. The small unit at Peterhead and the cages at Inverness were based upon a very limited, repressive regime and their success was debatable (the original Working Party Report, for example, contained a cogent critique of the Inverness Unit). The authorities did not, however abandon the small unit policy but rather added to it a new and very different one. This new unit was conceived on a psychiatric, therapeutic basis, in part because of the feeling that something new and different was needed and in part because of the then prevalent belief that therapy of an intensive type might be successful.

The small unit that actually opened in Barlinnie jail was the outcome. The report of the Working Party which recommended it envisaged a larger unit of up to 20 prisoners to be housed in the grounds of Perth prison, where it was felt suitable psychiatric services would be available, but, as with other penal developments, practical problems of lack of resources intervened and the unit that opened in Barlinnie was much smaller with a capacity, rarely reached, for eight inmates. The Working Party recommended that the unit should have its own governor – a sign of the autonomy it was to enjoy – and a mixed staff of discipline and nursing officers, together with a consultant psychiatrist, employed part-time, who was to be involved in the selection of inmates and in advising the governor. It also recommended that all staff, except the governor, should be volunteers, as one of the explicit aims of the unit was to break down the traditional staff-inmate relationship and to replace it with one based upon therapeutic principles. Except for the recommendation as to the size of the Special Unit (see above), all the other principle ones were accepted by the then Conservative Government and implemented.

The Barlinnie Special Unit Regime

I have emphasised that in its original conception the Barlinnie Special Unit was conceived within a clear treatment/psychiatric framework. Although as a very broad framework this has never been completely abandoned, it has been substantially modified. Those modifications have been largely evolutionary and can be summarised as a movement away from a clinically based regime towards one which is described as a 'community culture'. As was said in the introduction, it is for this 'community culture' that the Special Unit has subsequently become well known. Interestingly, these modifications appear not to have been resisted by the authorities. Indeed, if we accept BOYLE's account, the authorities not only tolerated them but, to an extent, especially in early days, lent encouragement (BOYLE, 1984). Certainly, it is clear that the autonomous status of the Unit, with its own governor, combined with strong support from a senior civil servant (Alex STEPHENS, Secretary to the Working Party), and from a sympathetic member of the government (Alick BUCHANAN-SMITH created an administrative and ideological 'space' within which the nature of the regime appears to have been largely determined by those staff and inmates who were its first members. Indeed, the Unit was seen to have developed such autonomy that in 1977 the Labour government and the prison authorities (Alex STEPHENS had been transferred for other duties) drew up new guide-lines wich tried to determine more clearly the acceptable limits to the role of inmates in the running of the Unit. These guide-lines endeavoured to reassert the primary role of the governor as the manager of the Unit and to redress the imbalance the prison authorities saw to have developed in staff-inmate relationships. The guide-lines were also clearly a reaction to the very considerable publicity the Unit had attracted (again see BOYLE, 1984).

Nevertheless, the underlying trust of the regime was endorsed as recognition was given to the concept of the Special Unit as a 'community' and the regime has continued to develop along these lines thereafter.

The Meaning of Community Culture

In this next section I wish to describe the nature of the Barlinnie regime in greater detail. My objectives are, first, simply to provide information on what a community based regime looks like, and how it is organised on a day-to-day basis. My second and rather more ambitious objective is to try and advance a sociological interpretation of this regime in part to show how it compares with other more traditional ones, but also to highlight the significance of the regime to the sociology of imprisonment and social control. My aim will be to tease out the sociological implications of what is probably the most intriguing aspect of the Barlinnie regime – the idea of it as a participatory community. I need, of course to explain more fully what I mean by this but, perhaps more importantly in doing this I need also to show that the idea of a participatory community in a prison setting is not a contradiction in terms. I say this, because the predominant conception of the prison, as a place of coercive power, seems to rule out the possibility of talking sensibly about a participatory community within a prison setting, especially one which includes inmates. Indeed, the problem is further compounded

because as well as there being legitimate doubts as to whether one can talk properly of inmate 'participation' there is an equal doubt as to whether one can legitimately use the term 'community' to describe the nature of social relationships in prison. Of course, there is a considerable body of sociological literature that does apply the concept of community (such as CLEMMER, *The Prison Community*, [1940] and SYKES, *The Society of Captives*, [1958]) to the prison, but the actual description of what these 'communities' look like does raise doubts as to whether the term is being properly applied – at the best the application seems to me in many ways to constitute a special or limiting case. Studies such as SYKES, for example, a classic piece of work, shows inmate sub-cultures exist in prison, and demonstrates also that prison authorities have to 'negotiate' with these to maintain order. But I think there is doubt as to whether these inmate sub-cultures can be seen as communities because they lack certain crucial characteristics. For instance, the general picture of inmate sub-culture in the prison literature portrays them as essentially defensive alliances whose prime purpose is to mitigate the rigours of what is otherwise described as something close to a Hobbesian war of all against all. There exists, it seems, not only an unbridgeable gulf between staff and inmates – a theme picked up by BOYLE in his description of traditional 'prison-culture' – but inmate sub-cultures are portrayed also as very often in conflict, if not as in outright war, with one another. This, of course, is a small part of the wider picture of the prison as a place of violence and power, but the important thing for my purposes is the way in which this broad picture compares to that invoked by the notion of community. The concept of community is more than a purely descriptive term. It is also normative and thus evaluative. To describe a network of social relationships as constituting a community implies the existence of more than a group of individuals living in close geographical proximity. Rather, the term community connotes certain qualitative aspects of these relationships. In communities we expect social relationships to be affective rather than instrumental; communities are supposed to be entities in which individuals feel a sense of obligation and to which they have a desire to belong. My point is that although not all of these characteristics are absent from social relationships within the prison, one would be surprised to see the prison described by such a vocabulary as, for example, places to which individuals feel a sense of obligation or to which they wish to belong.

Yet it is precisely this type of vocabulary that is used to describe the Barlinnie regime. While it ought never to be forgotten that the Barlinnie Special Unit is a prison and thus is premised upon coercion, its internal social dynamics are said to foster the community type of social relationships spoken of above. The main source of evidence for this, as has been said, must be both of BOYLE's books, in particular *The Pain of Confinement* (1984). Although both these books must, as was argued earlier, be used with some caution (they are not, to be fair, presented as an objective account but more as a plea for the Unit and himself) the broad picture created is confirmed by other insiders (WHATMORE, 1987). Peter WHATMORE has served as the consultant psychiatrist to the Unit since its foundation and thus, although not an inmate or member of staff, is in a position to report. His brief account of the Special Unit, while not containing the wealth of detail present in BOYLE's, lends support to it. The picture which emerges from both is of a close, tight-knit community in which, as was envisaged by the Working Party,

traditional staff-inmate relationships have been transformed and the traditional, divisive prison culture considerably modified. Inmates do participate in decision-making and have a voice in most matters affecting the Unit save for matters relating to security and some questions of staffing.

The Barlinnie Special Unit thus does appear to be a genuine example of what I earlier claimed could be seen as a contradiction in terms; a participatory community in a prison setting.

The question that naturally arises from this is 'how is this achieved?'. I suggest this question can be further broken down into two issues; first, how did such a Unit become possible in a penal setting and second, how on a day-to-day basis, does the Unit work as a community? As the earlier part of this paper attempts to answer the first of these questions, my concern now is with the second.

The Special Unit as a community

I suggest that the key to understanding how the special Unit works as a community lies in an appreciation of how its internal mechanisms of social control operate. There appears to me to be two such mechanisms at work. First, those aimed at integrating individuals both staff and inmates, into the larger cultural entity known as 'the community'. Second, those whose purpose is to foster in the inmates (in particular) a sense of individual responsability and personal autonomy. In short, social control in the Special Unit's community is composed of forces encouraging both solidarity or collectivity and autonomy or individuality.

At a practical level, the principle means of developing a sense of solidarity or collectivity is the compulsory weekly community meeting that has been a feature of the Special Unit since its inception. The explicit purpose of this meeting is to provide a forum where practical matters relating to the running of the Unit can be discussed and decisions taken. It is not, however, only questions of housekeeping that are discussed. Another explicit purpose is to be a context for the airing of grievances and complaints; inmates and staff are encouraged to discuss these matters openly and to resolve them without turning to violence. A third, very important purpose, is that these meetings are also, as far as the Unit is concerned, the formal disciplinary mechanism. Individuals who break the norms and rules of the community are open not only to criticism but also, as far as the inmates are concerned, to being sanctioned by the group in these meeting. The sanctions can vary from sometimes savage personal criticism to the suspension of some of the privileges otherwise enjoyed. For example, one of the special privileges enjoyed by inmates (in the Barlinnie Unit only) is an open visits policy; not only are inmates allowed regular visits from family and friends but these may take place within the inmate's cell, without the supervision of staff.

As was said, these meetings occur every week and attendance at them is compulsory. In addition, however, it is possible for any member of the community to call for a special meeting if he feels that an important or worrying question has arisen that warrants immediate attention. Judging from the descriptions given by BOYLE, these emergency meetings were a regular feature of the Unit's early days and, naturally enough, were most common when some issue arose which was seen to treaten it. For example, there were two serious incidents that had the potential

to cause considerable damage; first, a serious assault, involving a knife attack by one inmate upon another and second, a death from a drug overdose. Although in the case of the assault the aggressor was removed from the Unit, the official response was otherwise to leave the community to deal with the events.

Is is quite clear that these meetings are one of the principle means of social control in the Unit. Viewed sociologically, they are the context in which rules and norms evolve and sanctions are applied. One aspect of this which is crucial to the success of the Unit is that this process of rule-making results in the inmates feeling a sense of obligation not only to the group (the community) but also to the rules themselves. And it is upon this sense of obligation that the wider forces of social integration within the community are in part based. The active involvement in rule-making and enforcement encourages inmates to see themselves as having a 'stake' in the orderly running of the Unit ('it is their Unit') and this in turn means that, with a few exceptions, it has proved possible to do away with the ordinary disciplinary mechanism that exist in prisons. Although there was a discipline cell in the Unit when it was first opened, it no longer exists but is used for other purposes, such as a recreation room.

From one point of view it may appear that the social order of the Unit is maintained essentially by informal codes of conduct and informal rules and norms. It would, however, I suggest, be a mistake to regard these norms as informal because they only seem so from the outside. If they are viewed from the inside, then the regularity of the community meetings, the constant discussion of grievances and of what is to constitute acceptable behaviour, must give any rules thus created a deep sense of importance and obligatory significance. COYLE has suggested it is possible to summarise the code of conduct that has evolved over the years in the following way (COYLE, 1987, p. 241).

(I) The Unit selects its own prisoners;

(II) All staff with the exception of the governor, are volunteers;

(III) 'Once out, never back';

(IV) No violence, drug abuse or gross offence against discipline;

(V) Prisoners must be able to submit disputes and disagreements to argument within the community and to accept its decisions;

(VI) The open visit policy applies to official and semi-official visitors as well as to the personal visitors of the inmates;

(VII) The prisoner must come to terms with the fact of being in custody.

One consequence of the way in which the Unit is organised is that it has developed what, in Durkheimian terms, one may call a very specific form of collective consciousness. The impression created by BOYLE's and WHATMORE's accounts is that the Unit has what appears to be a form of quasi-mechanical solidarity. I say this, because there is a clear sense in which inmates are described as perceiving the Unit as being more than the sum of its parts; as existing as an independent entity, above and beyond the individuals who comprise it. This, no doubt, is fostered both by the small number of people involved but it also must be related to the intensity of relationships created by the requirement to discuss all matters in public, in the community meetings. There is a sense in which the personal identity of the individual inmate appears in many respects thus to be subordinated to the collective identity of the Unit as a whole.

The nurturing of a sense of personal autonomy and responsability that is also a feature of the Special Unit both reinforces the pressures that flow from the community meetings but also exists in the tension with them. One of the explicit aims of the Special Unit has always been to endeavour to 'reform' individuals by nurturing in them a reflective awareness of themselves as autonomous individuals who are to be held responsible both for the crimes they have committed and for their own future development. This objective is part of the general culture of the community but is re-enforced als by, for example, the involvement of inmates in different types of 'creative' endeavour. In the Barlinnie Unit, the creative activities tend to be focused upon art – writing, painting, sculpure. In the Shotts Unit each inmate has to draw up a 'personal development programme' which is not so much aimed at imparting a marketable skill or craft as it is as extending the individuals awareness of his own potential.

The idea of the inmate as the autonomous individual has several interesting aspects to it. First, it can be seen as an attempt to reverse the normal consequences of prison regimes. Rather than invoking a mortification of self, with its consequent loss of a sense of autonomy, the Special Unit encourages its exploration and further elaboration. The sense of self is not stripped off by various procedures but is fostered. But, this process of individual empowerment takes place always withing the context of the very strong demands of the collective. If there is a moulding of a new subjectivity it is a subjectivity that remains always disciplined by the Unit.

From this point of view, the Special Unit constitutes an interesting example of a particular balance that is always to be reached between the forces of autonomy and solidarity. At one level, the Special Unit is a more liberal regime than others found in prisons, but at another it extracts a certain cost. The cost is that certain features or attributes of what is to be autonomous are qualified by the way in which the Unit works. There is a loss of autonomy that stretches beyond that necessarily induced by the simple fact of being imprisoned. The intensity of the regime, the need always to present oneself in a public setting erodes, I suggest, the sense of privacy that accompanies our conception of autonomy. The only 'private space' allowed by the Unit is the cell – outside the cell, all aspects of the individual appears to be made public property.

It can be seen that the Special Unit regime is, in many ways, a challenge. As such, it has been recognised from the beginning that not all staff or inmates are suited to it. Indeed that the regime could well be damaging to certain individuals. As was noted most staff are volunteers. For the inmates, there exists a careful process of screening, involving senior staff supported by psychiatrists and psychologists. It is a rule that an inmate with a serious psychiatric illness which would predispose them to uncontrollable violence or that would limit their involvement in the community are not accepted. Rather, the screening process aims to select those who have in some way been disruptive and/or violent but are preceived to be capable of (a) taking part in the regime, and (b) would benefit from its intensive nature. Clearly, one very important requirement is that the inmate is skilled verbally; the regime, as described above, necessitates a fairly high degree of verbal ability. So far only one inmate has been removed from the Unit because he was unable to cope with the pressures such a close-knit community imposes (WHAT-

MORE, 1987, p. 259). In all, the Special Unit has accommodated approximately 33 prisoners – the majority of whom have been serving life sentences.

My analysis of the Special Units regime has been aimed at demonstrating that it is a participatory community but one of a very special sort. Its social order appears to depend on a delicate dialectic between forces encouraging solidarity and those fostering autonomy. At one level, the Unit clearly gives much greater scope for the development of personal autonomy than a traditional prison regime but, at another level, this autonomy is qualified by the very pressing demands of the group. One task of future research could be to explore how this balance between collectivity and autonomy is negociated and achieved on a daily basis and the consequences of this for the inmates (and staff) view of himself.

Does the Special Unit work?

Quite clearly at one level the Special Unit must be counted a considerable success. Although it has passed through a number of crises, including, as mentioned, a serious assault and a death from drug misuse, and has had certain limits placed upon it, the Unit is still in existence and difficult prisoners continue to be sent there. Indeed its success can be judged by the opening of the similar Shotts Unit in 1990. Although the Scotts facility was originally built to rehouse the Barlinnie Unit, the pressures arising from the series of disturbances that occurred in the late 1980's in Scottish prisons, resulted in the Scotts Unit becoming an addition to the system.

At another level, the evidence for the success of the Unit is equivocal because of the paucity of evaluative studies. On the one hand we have the dramatic public success of individuals, such as Jimmy BOYLE. BOYLE, who was once described as 'Scotland's most violent man', has been released from prison for 10 years and continues to live a public and successful life. On the other hand, some prisoners who have spent time in the Unit and have been released either on parole or at the expiry of their sentence have been reconvicted, some for serious crimes. The one existing small-scale evaluative study that has been carried out reports, however, a lower rate of recidivism amongst ex-Special Unit inmates than might otherwise be expected and also claims that there have been fewer violent incidents in the Unit than would be predicted, given the type of inmate selected (COOKE, 1989).

In the formal sense in which criminologists often measure success of failure (such as recidivism rates, etc.), there is a need for further research which, as was said, is now underway, albeit belatedly. Until this research is complete, the question of this type of formal evaluation must remain open. There do exist, however, other relevant but less formal criteria of success to take into account, one of which is whether the Unit has had a wider impact on the Scottish prison system. At one level the prevailing philosophy of the Scottish system as a whole has developed along similar limes to the Barlinnie regime. Since the publication of *Opportunity and Responsability* (SHHD 1990), the underlying rationale of imprisonment has been to treat the prisoner as a 'responsible' client and the task of the Prison Service has come to be seen as providing opportunities for the client prisoner to take up if he/she wishes. Given that one explicit aim of the Unit has

been, as was shown, to emphasise the autonomy of the individual, to make him accept responsability, it is tempting to interpret what has happened as a process whereby the authorities have generalised the lessons learned from the Unit. Such an interpretation would, I think, be a little misleading. In the first place the concept of the prisoner as a responsible individual inherent in *Opportunity and Responsability* has evolved largely in response to a decline in the belief in rehabilitation and treatment. Yet such an ideology is, it seems to me, still applicable to the Special Unit's regime. Secondly, and more importantly, the background to *Opportunity and Responsability* is probably better sought in changing views on how to manage resources than it is in the spread of a particular idea, successful or not, of how to regard prisoners (except in as much as inmates are one of the chief resources that any prison must manage). Nevertheless, it would seem idle to deny that the example of the Special Unit was completely irrelevant to the philosophy behind these penal changes. It seems quite reasonable to suppose that the Special Unit has operated as a type of limiting case – it has taken one category of the most 'difficult' of prisoners and shown how a certain type of regime can lead to their better management; this must surely hold out lessons for the treatment of the less difficult, 'ordinary' prisoner?

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