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# **THE FIRST EIGHT-YEARS OF THE PGA**

**1987-1995**

by

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(Originally published in the PGA Magazine 39 –November 1996)

THE PRISON GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION is now more than eight years old. It should be no surprise that much of the energy of those involved in setting up and running the PGA had to go into immediate issues and crises. Consequently there has been little time for any analysis or considered reflection. This article is an attempt to review the setting up of the Association against a wider perspective and to highlight the more significant developments in the Association's first eight years. There are important questions to consider especially the reasons why the PGA was founded and whether the Association has succeeded in meeting the expectations of its members.

A useful starting point is to consider the history of Governors' representation. We know that the representation of Prison Governors dates back to May 1920 when the "Superior Officers' Representative Board" (SORB) was first introduced under Captain R.H. D'Aeth, then Governor of Parkhurst. The SORB covered Governors, Medical Officers and Chaplains. It was set up following the establishment of the 'Prison Officers Representative Board" in 1919. There is little information available about the workings of this board. We do know that some Governors felt that it was unable to deliver effective representation.

Around 1949, the SORB was disbanded and the senior staff were encouraged to join conventional civil service trade unions. Chaplains and medical officers joined the Institute of Professional Civil Servants; Governors formed the Prison and Borstal Governors Branch of the Society of Civil Servants - generally known as the "Governors Branch". This type of representation for Governors - as part of a major civil service union - was not popular with some of the Governors.

Consequently for some twenty years there was occasional discussion about setting up a separate organisation and of "going it alone". A number of members of the Governors Branch committee were sympathetic to the idea of an independent organisation but were constrained by doubts as to whether a separate organisation

would be viable - especially whether it would be financially viable.

Starting in the seventies there were increasing strains between the Society of Civil Servants national body and the Governors Branch especially over the stand taken by the Union on controversial national issues. There were particular difficulties about what the Governor's Branch should do when the national body instructed members to take industrial action.

Behind the discussion of setting up an independent organisation was another important issue. Members were becoming increasingly interested in having a representative organisation that could speak out on "professional issues". So the question arose as to whether the trade union could balance its traditional "conditions of service" work with this "professional work"? Members growing interest in professional issues was an understandable response to growing public attention to prison matters. The setting up of a number of Inquiries into the Prison Service; the growing media interest and the consequent political interest in penal policy all created an atmosphere where many different interest groups and pressure groups started to speak out on penal policy. Prison Governors wanted to have their views expressed clearly and publicly. The danger was that if this could not be achieved Governors would lose their ability to influence penal policy. This growing expectation among Governors created considerable problems for the Governors' Branch committee which was made up of people with full-time management jobs; the limited time they had available for the work of the Branch made it extremely difficult to deal adequately with the growing workload on both trade union and professional issues.

In 1977 the Governors Branch held a weekend Conference to draw attention to the urgent problem of Prison Overcrowding. The significance of this development became clear at the end of the Conference when the Branch Chairman, Barry Wiggington, Governor of Brixton Prison, held a Press Conference. The media gave considerable coverage to the story including running it as a major item on national TV and radio news. This was the first time that the Governors representative organisation had used the media effectively. Yet despite the success of the overcrowding conference, there was growing frustration over the adequacy of the professional representation of Governors by the Governors Branch. This led some Governors to set up the "British Association of Prison Governors" (BAPG) in order to provide "professional" representation for Governors. Support was forthcoming from Governors in both Scotland and England and the BAPG soon acquired around 150 members. At this time the Governors Branch in England and Wales had around 500 members against a potential of just under 600. After a short life, BAPG closed but only after the Governors Branch undertook to give more time and effort to "professional" issues. Interestingly, BAPG survived in Scotland as a separate "professional" organisation.

In the moves towards a separate independent organisation, the next significant development occurred in 1981. A group of members in the Immigration Service decided to break away from the Society of Civil and Public Servants (the SCS had changed its name) and set up their own small union with about 1500 members. This proved to be a difficult and complex operation. The Governors Branch Committee watched events unfold and learned some critical lessons about how to start up an independent union. Perhaps most importantly, the Governors Branch realized that it was possible to run an independent union with quite a small membership. The argument that Governors could not survive on their own was no longer such an obstacle. None the less size was important and the potential membership of 5/600 looked to be rather small. So the question arose could the Governors in England and Wales combine with any other related group.

As it so happened, from 1979, there was a period of several years of close co-operation between the three Governors representative organisations in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This arose because the May Committee of Inquiry into Industrial Relations provided opportunities for meetings. All three Committees gave evidence together to the May Committee. As a follow up to this a UK Prison Governors Council (UKPGC) was set up to continue to foster co-operation between the Governors of the three services. This operated in 1983/84 but did not develop further.

However in the search for ways of setting up an independent organisation, another group started to emerge as possible partners. The Governors Branch Committee was becoming increasingly aware of the difficulties being experienced by Chief Officers over being adequately represented by the Prison Officers Association. Chief Officers were finding an increasing conflict between their management role and their trade union role. This was especially acute when the POA took industrial action. So it was becoming clear as the eighties unfolded that there was a growing coincidence of interest between Governors and Chief Officers in England and Wales: both unhappy with their representational arrangements linked to larger unions.

In 1984 a proposed merger between the SCPS and the CPISA aroused particular concerns among some members of the Governors branch, There were also considerable strains in relationships between the main Home Office branch of the SCPS, Outstations Branch - representing Administration Officers working in prisons - and the Governors Branch. This reflected a sharp conflict over posts and power between governors and administrators. The Governors branch was becoming increasingly interested in becoming independent.

In 1986/87 the opportunity to set up an independent organisation presented itself. The Service was almost completely absorbed in the moves towards Fresh Start. It was now clear that the Governor and Chief Officer grades were to be merged with common conditions of Service. The two existing unions were having some difficulty in handling this change. So the need for a new independent organisation was becoming ever more clear. As the grade mergers starting to take effect from the summer of 1987, informal discussions started between representatives of the Chief Officers and the Governors Branch which culminated at a meeting at Newbold Revel. The group who attended that meeting decided to act.

At the beginning of October 1987, a group of Governors and former Chief Officers resigned from the two old unions and founded the PGA. Independence Day marked the beginning of a period of high activity. The PGA was launched with a Steering Committee of those with experience in both the Governors Branch Committee and the former Chief Officers Committee. A manifesto was circulated to all potential members with an invitation to join the PGA. Recruitment proceeded quickly and by the first meeting of the Steering Committee on 15th October, the PGA had 337 members. Counter action was taken by both the POA and the SCPS but despite their efforts, the PGA's membership continued to rise steadily over the next few months. The PGA was placed on the list of Trade Unions by the Certification Officer on 6th November 1987. Departmental recognition by the Home Office followed early in 1988; Treasury recognition later that year. A certificate of independence was issued by the Certification Officer on 28th July 1988. By that date the PGA had over 650 members,

Northern Ireland Governors meanwhile had been watching the PGA with considerable interest. They had similar difficulties in their relationships with the Northern Ireland Alliance, the large general civil service union representing them. Informal discussions began between the PGA and Northern Ireland Governors. PGA Conference in March 1989 approved terms for Northern Ireland Governors joining the Association. By June 1989 some 90 Northern Ireland Governors had joined bringing the total membership over 800. Recognition for the PGA was sought from Northern Ireland Office and achieved by the end of the year.

Membership growth continued steadily over the next few years with the PGA achieving over 1000 members towards the end of 1992. Membership had been extended to cover those in the Accelerated Promotion Scheme, some specialist managers with previous service in uniform and the Assistant Director Grade. A few Scottish Governors had joined; also several of the Governors working in Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man decided to become members; by 1992, the PGA represented about 90% of the potential members. As there was little further scope for further recruitment member

ship figures have held steady just over 1000 since 1992.

The Scottish Governors continued to be represented by the NUCPS --as the SCPS had now become. There was some informal contact between the two organisations but the Scots valued their existing arrangements and decided to remain with the status quo. Major restructuring in 1994/95 to the Scottish service blurred the definition of Governors considerably and made the Scottish service increasingly different from the Services where the PGA has representative rights.

Another PGA membership development was the establishment of a "retired Governors" section building on the work of Arthur Williamson who had set up a "Retired Governors Newsletter" in 1980. By the end of 1995 the PGA had over 250 retired members. In addition to the Newsletter the PGA had established social gatherings for retired members including an annual Garden Party and Winter House Parties.

Perhaps the most vital task of a small union with a widely dispersed membership is to organize good communications. Within weeks of the PGA being launched the first Bulletin was issued. Around 100 have now been issued on the basis of one per member. But the PGA realized that the Bulletin on its own was insufficient. A Magazine was planned and launched in May 1989. The magazine has now reached its 37 edition generally coming out 6 times a year. The PGA Bulletin and Magazine together with the Retired Governors Newsletter were all gradually developed into good quality publications and are now printed at a small specialist printer in Warrington. There is a history of "prison printing" in Warrington; John Howard's "State of the Prisons" was published and printed in the town.

The PGA was immediately confronted with the problem of how to cope with the trade union and the professional work that its members expected of it. During the first two years, much of the available energy went into establishing the Association. A considerable amount of energy has continued to go into developing the organisation throughout the PGA's life so far. For example, the task of running an Annual Conference was new to many members and it took a number of years to develop the most suitable procedures for handling the business of the Association. Even in 1995, there were important organisational developments when the Conference was moved for the first time from the Prison Service College to a hotel.

But despite the pressures of developing appropriate organisation, the PGA has produced a significant amount of professional work as well as delivering on the essential trade union negotiations. Major policy positions have been worked up in response to the many developments in penal policy over the eight years of the

Associations life. The most interesting pieces of professional work were the "Evidence to the Woolf inquiry" in 1990 and the launch of the PGA Manifesto in 1995 almost eight years to the day from the foundation of the Association.

The PGA has also achieved remarkable success in influencing the debate on penal policy. The media and the other pressure groups have come to respect the PGA's ability to come up with sensible and often quite radical plans to improve the workings of the penal system. The PGA has achieved substantial media coverage; for example the 1995 Annual Conference was covered over a 24 hour period by the BBC with the Conference running as either the second or third item on the News throughout. There is also growing evidence that the PGA is significantly influencing policy. The decision to appoint the first in-service Director General in 1995 must be partially the result of a sustained campaign by the PGA. Since it was founded the PGA has worked to ensure that more of those leading the Service had operational experience of working in prisons with prisoners.

It is important not to overstate the influence of the PGA. The Association was founded at a time when radical change was being imposed upon the Service from the politicians. The decision to open up a commercial market in prisons by setting up a private prison sector caused considerable pressure, stress and anxiety. The decision to "market test" Strangeways prison -to require staff to compete against the private sector for their jobs - reinforced the extent of the change the Service was facing.

Another example of the limitations on the influence of the PGA would be the issue of the organisation of the Service. The PGA opposed the abolition of the regions and the centralizing moves of the 1990 HO re-organisation. Those moves went through. But the PGA influenced the shape of the reorganization and its opposition is on the record. Within the reorganization there was a concerted attempt made by senior civil servants to downgrade the importance of operational experience for those moving into senior operational posts. Directors with line responsibility for prisons were appointed who had never governed prisons. Area Managers were appointed to manage Governors, two without Governing experience. There were moves to bring those without operational experience straight into senior positions in prisons. The opposition of the PGA to these moves was ignored and it was only the pressure of events -especially escapes- that caused these plans to be reversed. But the PGA's ability to make the case in public and at the highest political level played a part in preventing foolish policies from being taken to extremes and certainty ensured that when the policies failed a cover up of failure and a continuation of a failed policy was not possible.

The PGA has never hesitated to expose bad conditions and to press for reasonable conditions for prisoners. At the same time, the Association has exposed the real problems of control faced by prison staff and the need for an adequate system of rewards and punishments to assist good order in prisons.

The PGA has also had much to contribute to the debate about improving staffing and managing our prisons as economically as possible. The Association has a special role in balancing the excesses on occasions of the POA on the one hand and of unreasonable senior management on the other. At the heart of this has been the PGAs desire to see staff used properly with fulfilling and demanding jobs giving staff proper job satisfaction. Particular difficulties arose in 1994 when the actions of the POA caused the Prisons Board to seek legal redress which resulted in both the POA and the PGA losing - temporarily- their legal immunity as trade unions.

Of the many expectations members had of the PGA, none was more important than effective support for members under pressure or in difficulty. In this area, the PGA has built up considerable experience of defending members in a wide variety of ways. Much of this work consists of members of the NEC giving advice, writing letters to HQ, or assisting in presenting a case to line management. But it has also involved legal representation before Courts and before Inquiries and the public defence of members pilloried by politicians or by the media. This may well have been the field in which the

PGA has done most for members and is most appreciated. The PGA has also developed more effective support for members than was available previously.

When the PGA was set up the organizing committee tried to achieve better services for members than had been possible previously. This started with higher Death Benefit payments and highly effective insurance cover. Over the eight years membership services have been greatly expanded. They now include stress care, access to reduced rate private medical insurance, free diaries and a range of PGA merchandise. All this has played a vital part in building up the group identity of Governors and encouraging the mutual support which characterizes the organisation. A fine example of this would be the "Battered Phoenix" tie or scarf. This is awarded on the nomination of members by the NEC to a wide variety of individuals who have experienced an especially difficult time at work. The tie is highly regarded and greatly appreciated by the recipients.

As the PGA approaches its tenth year, the Association has achieved a proud track record of sustaining and encouraging its members through a very difficult period. It takes about ten years to establish a reputation for most new organisations. The PGA had acquired a reputation within a couple of years and many outsiders are surprised that it is under ten years old. But there is a challenging future ahead.

Change is likely to continue to effect prisons at a very fast rate and it is difficult to see how current pressure of rising populations and financial constraints are to be reconciled.

Governors are likely to need the PGA

for many years to come.

The PGA came into existence partly through the failure of existing organisations to meet the needs of Governors. The PGAs' success in attracting and retaining members has been quite remarkable. This is

certainly the most telling evidence that the Association is meeting the needs of its members. But the future is always unclear and the PGA's future will depend on whether it can continue to represent its members in a changing world.