

[Speech Sjef van Gennip, 23rd June 2006 CEP Conference Jersey]

'Probation's Future: National and European Stakeholders'

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I joined the probation service in the seventies as probation officer, Bob Dylan sang his song: 'Times they are a changing'. And times have changed since then. Society is asking different services from us. We have different stakeholders. The media follows everything about safety and crime with more than normal interest. The position of the probation service in realm of security has changed. And somehow, as European probation services we are not capable to get those changes, and the impact of our work into the limelight.

In preparation of my speech to you today, I visited the websites of the European Union and the Council of Europe. On those websites, I entered the word "crime" in their search engines. The hits that I got, dealt with investigation of crime. To be more precise the investigation of four types of crime: economic crime; organized crime; cyber crime; and terrorism. When I talk to our stakeholders in The Netherlands, we never talk about economic crime. They never ask me questions about the role my organisation can play in fighting cyber crime. Nor do they ask me how probation can help get rid of terrorism.

Anyway, the same exercise, this time with the word "probation" gave me a total of 12 hits. Ten of them proved hardly relevant when I studied them. That's remarkable, to say the least. There are hundreds of thousands of documents on those sites and only two are about the probation service! The two remaining documents were about after-care and about poverty and social exclusion. The latter subject said that the European Commission presented, for the first time, a policy document on poverty and social exclusion. Sadly, the link to the document itself could not be opened.

I have drawn two conclusions from the above:

- 1 At European level, the criminological issues of probation services are bottom of the list;
- 2 Probation services are not an issue worth discussing at European level.

Ladies and gentleman these are sad conclusions to draw. But please don't worry. A wise man once told me, for every problem there is a solution. I will get back to this issue later on in my speech.

Security has become a subjective term. It has become a feeling. That feeling is the result of the exclusive attention the media pay to anything that has to do with safety. In the Netherlands, we have about ten television channels. Every channel has one or more programmes that focus on safety in one way or another. Crime reporters have become celebrities. One of them even attempted to begin a political party. He failed. Thank God for small favours.

Today, our politicians hardly make a distinction between the personal fears of their citizens and the objective reality. That's a dangerous situation. After all, each individual may have his or her own fears. This means that there are as many manifestations of fear as there are people. That makes drafting a security policy rather difficult.

As a result, the concepts of crime and offenders have been given new definitions. Offenders are no longer perpetrators of criminal offences, but are the cause of security concerns. They seem to be causing the feeling of insecurity that we feel on a day to day basis. Criminality is no longer a social problem for which social solutions must be found, but an external threat. As a consequence, there is a clear danger that offenders become separated from society, become literally outcasts, who do not belong.

We should be determined to prevent that from happening. As probation service in Europe, that should be one of our corporate goals.

The stakeholders of the probation service will more or less be the same in all countries. I distinguish between three kinds of stakeholder. There are stakeholders at local or regional level, at national level and at international – let us limit ourselves to Europe for now – level. So who are those stakeholders? And what do they want from the probation service?

The stakeholders at local level are:

- The local authorities, or borough councils and community centres;
- The public prosecutors and judges;
- The police;
- Other social institutions, such as the social services, employment centres, housing corporations and schools.

These stakeholders require the ordinary services from the probation service:

- Diagnosis and recommendations on offenders and suspects;
- Supervision of and influence on behaviour of offenders
- The execution of specific sentences, such as community service orders.

In addition, these stakeholders often want to obtain practical know-how and expertise to support their own tasks. Bold and blunt. They want our help to make society a safer place. These local stakeholders contact the probation service more and more for recommendations and collaboration. They have to deal on a day to day basis with public nuisance. Due to this development, the probation service is increasingly engaged in dealing with crime as a social problem and not with crime as an act of an individual criminal.

We see the same happen with the stakeholders at national level. Often, this involves the same institutions and organizations that I mentioned earlier, but then usually the umbrella organizations:

- Ministries and other national bodies.

These stakeholders often seek from the probation service collaboration in developing strategic policy lines. And this policy primarily addresses what I would like to call visible crime: everyday crime involving citizens. And last but not least the international stakeholders are the governments and the various bodies in which they are united, such as the European Union and the Council of Europe. And for me personally, I think a very important stakeholder of the probation service is the Media. The exclusive attention the media pay to anything that has to do with safety we have a chance to get

Media attention for the work that we do, the role that we play, and the solutions that we can bring to our stakeholders to make society a safer and nicer place to life in.

I promised you that I would get back on the solutions. Because, like I said before for every problem, there is a solution.

We need more cross-border collaboration between probation services in the performance of their duties. Crime is becoming more and more international. For example in January 2005, two-thousand-four-hundred and fifty Dutch perpetrators were serving a prison sentence in more than eighty nine countries. They will return to their home country after serving there sentence. Better collaboration between probation services, could help that they won't relapse into criminal behaviour again. Every country that punishes its citizens by putting them behind bars or restricting their freedom must also ensure that the sentence is not something separate. And that the punished citizens, once they have served their sentence, can return to society in a decent and responsible way. That, of course, is the duty of the probation service.

We need to join forces in the scientific development and innovation of methods and techniques of the probation services. The so-called 'What Works' movement has brought about many good things. Thanks in part to the fruitful and frequent collaboration with the UK probation service; we have come as far in the Netherlands as we have today. Pioneers in the development of probation services, should reach out to other countries. Let them benefit from knowledge and expertise. Countries that have no probation service in place should be assisted by countries with lots of relevant know-how and expertise to set up such a service.

And last but not least. We should join forces, to interest scientists to do research on the results of our work.

So we know that the politicians on a European level don't know anything about the probation service. Well, that may be so. However, that does not mean that we should throw in the towel. We have to change that situation. Let me summarize what we should achieve in five points:

- Lobbying with European political and administrative bodies. I suspect that the lack of interest for probation services is primarily ignorance. Many European politicians don't know the first thing about the probation service. We can give them information and urge the necessity of an international role for the probation service.

- Representation in Brussels that makes a difference. A role alone is not good enough. We have to adopt a clear stance in the European political arena, and in the associated administrative system. To put it simply, a specific body needs to be set up, staffed with people that reach out to politicians and the media to bring probation service issues to their attention.
- A European institute for criminal research. A research institute that makes the international aspects of probation work its core subject.
- Clear messages to the media. A place and position in international politics must go hand in hand with clear communications on our vision on security and crime. In the same way that we must prevent ending up as the politicians' plaything, we must make sure that our agendas are not set by the media. The only way to do that is by saying in plain language what we believe and want, and how we contribute in preventing crime and insecurity.
- A professional European organization for probation services. This can be the fly in the ointment of European politicians. And can state independent opinions on crime and insecurity issues. Right, I can hear you think: that is already in place! Indeed, there is an organization for probation services. This conference is organized by that very body. However, without trying to dispose of the good work this organization has done over the past few years, I dare argue that the CEP should become more professional, if we really want to achieve the goals I mentioned earlier. In the first place, that means more staff and funds. Secondly, it means bringing the probation work to the next level.

Although, as I said, there were few hits on the websites of the European Union and the Council of Europe, the ones I did find were highly important. Everything is about reducing the gap in society between groups of people. Combating poverty is one way to do that. Preventing exclusion is another one. I regard the latter definitely as a task for the international probation service: preventing people from becoming excluded and promoting an acceptable place in society for everybody. Even for those who have committed a crime and served their sentence.

That makes crime prevention an issue in which the probation services should be involved. I started my speech with a remark to Bob Dylan's 'Times they are a changing'. And I believe they are. We have the possibility to achieve a strong position for probation in Europe. And step into the limelight once and for all. And make our contribution to a safer society visible, for all our stakeholders to see.

Thank you for your attention.