

## **"SO HOW DID SAVING WORK AGAIN, DAD?" - THE EXTREME FINANCIAL PRESSURES ON FRONTLINE PUBLIC SERVANTS SHOW WHY MAY'S GOVERNMENT IS 'ON PROBATION'**

*An article on probation pay issues from Napo Assistant General Secretary, Dean Rogers  
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In the second of three articles on the challenges around public sector pay, Napo Assistant General Secretary Dean Rogers sets out the extreme scale of the financial pressures facing those on the frontline of our caring professions in our cities who face challenges with housing, living cost and debt management that make the idea of saving seem fantastical. In this article he concludes with suggestions for macro - policy changes before, in the final instalment, exploring some transitional ideas that could begin to move the pay culture.

### **Number 10's Top Gear team gear are backfiring**

The Institute of Fiscal Studies quick response to May and Hammond's Autumn statement warned of grim times continuing for most of us. I assume someone called Clarkson was to blame for the ridiculous Number 10 repost about disposable income rising. Any credible analysis of reality by a classroom teacher, probation officer or young police constable would point you towards why so many of the aspiring professional middle classes hold our politicians in increasing contempt - without even starting on the yet to be fully felt economic impact of Brexit. This is how Trump wins....the politicians literally don't recognise the reality.

### **What does a Probation Officer do and for how much?**

I'm guessing the vast majority of people would have little idea what being a Probation Officer in the UK involves, let alone how much they earn. Our politicians are obviously no different. Google search 'images of Probation Officers' and the first two pages are pics of armed, uniformed neo-cops in the USA. What probation looks like and does reflect your society's view of what justice is for and how it should work so here things are pretty different. Likewise, what public servants earn reflects their society's 'value' on what they do...

Our Probation Officers' are tasked with earning the trust and confidence of people approaching or having been released from prison, so that they can guide, support or direct the offender away from a path back to prison. Offenders can be complex, damaged, dangerous individuals for whom trust and engagement with any authority figure would itself be a new skill. Probation Officers have to understand that and get them onside. They have to help find their clients homes, jobs and/or training, health care and support (especially given the high chance their charge will have addiction and/or mental health issues; and unstable wider social networks). Multi - agency partnering, mediation, negotiation, flexibility...your Probation Officer

needs it all these skills, as well as significant expertise in psychology, sociology and criminology. In addition, the ICT they have to work with still runs on Lotus Notes...

The Probation Officer will write reports and recommend if their charge should stay free or go back into the care of the prison system - so high levels of complex decision making. If one of their charges commits a Serious Further Offense (SFO) it is the Probation Officer who is usually first in the proverbial dock - so high levels of personal and public accountability. The pressures on - and recently it's increased enormously after rushed and ill thought through government reforms. When delivery of probation was split (more background in article 1 of this series) if the probation officer ended up in the centralised National Probation Service their caseload likely rose a bit and became more focused on cases with an identifiable high risk to the public...heavy, emotionally demanding sex offenders, sociopaths and psychos amongst them. If you ended up in the privatised CRC you shouldn't have too many high riskers but your caseload is increasingly likely to around 100 clients and your employer is being paid by results.

To qualify to get to do this type of work you need to have a PQUIP - the only recognised post-graduate qualification, specifically developed for probation. It takes 3 years of on-the-job training...so a minimum of 8 years higher and further education in total.

***So how much do you reckon they should get...ask your MP and see what they say....***

Now let me tell you the answer. The starting salary on qualifying is just over £29,000 p/a or around £2500 p/m before any stoppages. There is currently contractual pay progression but at 1 x 1% step a year. Since 2010 and Osborne's 'Public Sector Pay Freeze' (which has run against the background of huge reform and upheaval of the service) that's all anyone has got. The weighted average salary for Probation Officers in England and Wales is now under £32,000 p/a. Some have been in post a decade and have still not reached the mid - point of their promised pay range.

Even NOMS recognise this isn't sustainable - a shortage of several hundred qualified staff in London alone has rammmed this home but of course, May and Hammond and the hidden Clarkson in the Treasury accounts department are reluctant to give out new money to address this challenge because, 'austerity needs to put public accounts back in order' - and while they're at it probation staff have had to pay more into their pension so that Government can 'be fair to private sector employees'.....

### **Do the maths**

It's pretty easy to see why there is a shortage of qualified Probation Officers in London. Let's do the maths. The London weighting takes the average up to around £35,000. Let's assume:

A. Our highly qualified caring professional woman (aka Sara) wants to at least be able to share a 2 bedroom flat in a cheaper London suburb (e.g. Sutton) to limit commuting to around 1 and 1/2 hours a day and she has a mobile phone. That's at least a 50% share of average rent, council tax and utilities (£940p/m); commuting costs of a minimum £120 p/m and £30 p/m for a reliable phone with insurance (necessary with her clients).

B. Basic deductions before Sara gets her hands on any of the money to pay for rent, etc. = £833.33 income tax and NI; £198.33 pension contributions; and £105 fixed payment on her student loan (aka the Graduate Tax) -

A + B = 1756.66 or potential disposable income of £1160.01 p/m or £267.69 p/w

OK - that's enough for her to live on but fair and reasonable reward for what she does for society? She'd like to dress like a smart young professional. She'd like a decent holiday once a year. Having moved to London to work she'd like to capitalise on its cultural opportunities and occasionally go to a show or gig even once a month. But let's Sara spends a conservative £75 a week on food (£5 p/d for lunch at work and £50 for all other meals, milk, bread, etc. at the local Aldi); wants to watch TV or surf broad band on the nights she can't afford to go out; and spends about £25 a month on clothes you're rapidly heading towards less than £100 p/w left. Sara is stuck in the life of a perpetual student but she's a 30 something professional.

What she'd love to do and what everyone from the Top Gear team in Downing Street to her Dad keeps telling her to do is save...for a mortgage perhaps. Is that too much to expect from a professional graduate in a stressful responsible job? Her teacher boyfriend Steve has just moved in after her old flatmate gave up and moved back to Yorkshire. She's not sure it'll work out as they're both really exhausted all the time and aren't having much fun, but one big room and a box room maybe more affordable if the rent goes up and they can't afford to stay where they are. Her Mum is excited about Steve but if she did present a grandchild they'd be homeless on one wage or childcare would swallow all their left over cash.

***Saving for Sara and her generation is a historical concept.*** She has a pension which she understands is important for her retirement - she doesn't expect the state to look after her and she saw her grandparents savings whipped out when they needed care. But it is hard to prioritise saving for a rainy day when it is "pissing down" now. She used to save occasional pocket money as a kid but the banks used to give her interest which they don't do now...although they charge enough of it on the credit card bill she tries not to talk or think about and which is still covering last year's week in Tenerife for her 30th. Sara knows saving would be good but shouting at her about it isn't going to make it any more possible...

Scene from 'The Life of Sara'

Sunday at Sara 's Mum and Dad's in Hertford

Sara: Dad I know I'd be in trouble if the rent went up, or I was off work...

Mum, if Steve 's off work he'd have to go...

but exactly what else should I give up to save...

No, don't be daft you don't have to give me the train fare from Sutton to Hertford so I can see you once a month - the free dinner 's charity enough".

OK, so Sara and Steve are an amalgam of real people I've made up to protect the innocent but their story is real enough. The reality in London, Brighton, Bristol and increasingly most of our major cities is more than

3 decades of misguided, irresponsible macro - economic policy that inflated housing costs whilst devaluing saving has left a nation addicted to debt and it's about to start hurting all of us again - and badly.

It's not just the domestic help and retail staff that our leftist journalists talk to who are not able to live or work in our cities - it's our teachers, nurses, social workers and probation staff; it's not just the unqualified low skilled who are doing 3 jobs and 70 hour weeks to function - it's also our caring professionals who society relies upon to keep us safe taking bar jobs and have sleepless nights worrying about surviving.

### **It doesn't have to be like this – May and Co are 'on probation'**

Of course, it's not always been like this and it doesn't have to be like this. Society can't afford not to invest differently. Ironically, Brexit as the most obvious piece of social and economic self-harm in our history, could present the critical opportunity to start again and radically re - direct our priorities. But as with preventing re-offending of any kind, the absolute starting point in getting the culprit to change their ways is getting them to recognise and accept their reality. The Top Gear crew in Downing Street are not even looking at the signs.

Old behaviours need to stop. We need to see new behaviours - addressing supply problems in housing and intervention in the market to moderate housing prices; investment and control in infrastructure to make commuting easier and cheaper; and investment in the frontline services themselves, inevitably starting with a careful, strategic de-frosting of the pay landscape and bringing in more sustainable reward structures. Instead of offering 'jammers' jam tomorrow we need them to focus on the long-term and develop worthwhile sweeteners whilst the other investments filter through.

But first and most of all we need some honesty and to decide that society really wants the situation to change. Saying we recognise the problem isn't enough. The language needs to change and we need to challenge those in power to challenge themselves. Don't talk about "affordable housing" until you realistically understand affordable; don't talk in %'s when people spend hard pounds; and don't make stuff up that you surely know is nonsense when you're being rumbled.

We need to make sure they've got the message – you've messed up. For years. You've promised us you'd look after us with low tax and that austerity would clear the debts but you've failed to match your promises. Debt is rising to 90% of GDP. The pain was for nothing. If you're serious about change look our Probation Officer members in the eye and tell them you can change, want to change and will change. Show them you won't go back to mixing with the old debt dealers. Show them this time you really mean it. Be honest with yourself and people will help you, starting by being honest back.

***The state locks people who've done bad things away to protect the rest of society - way too many of them as it happens. The principle function of the State is to protect its citizens. In a sensible, modern society this must mean no-one, not least professionals in frontline caring or public protection roles living in fear of losing their shelter, food, clothing, chance to work, or dignity. The nation state is failing so unless we can address these failures, disengagement with those in power will become more entrenched, more Trump's will emerge and more disasters will follow.***

***In the meantime, May's government, and to an extent the nation state, are on probation.***