

LAKEMAN LECTURE:

The Ombudsman – who are her customers?

Introduction

Thank you to Professor Hill and to the College for inviting me to give this Lakeman Lecture – it is a great honour for me and particularly so as an alumna of Royal Holloway and Bedford College. It's nice to be asked back.

It's also timely because, as the Ombudsman scholars amongst you will of course all know, this week marks the anniversary of the appointment of the world's first parliamentary Ombudsman. On 1 March 1810 Sweden became the first country in the world to appoint an Ombudsman – Lars August Mannerheim. (I have to say that I am indebted to Philip Giddings for this information – I certainly don't claim for myself the title of Ombudsman scholar).

What I do know is that the Lakeman Lecture was endowed by the Electoral Reform Society in 1981 in honour of Miss Enid Lakeman. I understand that Miss Lakeman attended all the lectures until her death in 1995. I am only sorry not to have had the opportunity to meet her and hear from her directly her views on democracy and electoral reform. I wonder what she would have had to say about the appointment of the first female Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman – who is neither a lawyer nor a career civil servant – nor indeed an Oxbridge graduate.

The Bedford College years

I hope you'll forgive me a somewhat self-indulgent few minutes at the start of this lecture – but as you may imagine an occasion like this generates a certain amount of nostalgia and some personal reflections.

Taking myself back to the summer of 1974 – almost thirty years ago – when I graduated from Bedford College – with a degree in German and philosophy – made me think about the lasting memories from those years - very few of which I have to say seem to have had much to do with my academic studies.

- Living in Hanover Lodge and walking through Regent's Park to college in the morning (does anyone else remember those vicious geese on the lake?) - what a wonderful introduction to London at the age of 19.
- My college days also included the first miners' strike and the three-day week – I remember studying by candlelight on more than one occasion. And working out where the power cuts were going to be – in order to be somewhere else when the lights went out.
- When I look back on there were also some frightening times – although I don't recall being especially frightened at the time. The IRA was highly active in London in the early 1970s – and often close to home. There was the explosion at the top of what was then the GPO tower; and the Balcombe Street siege - just around the corner from Tennyson halls of residence in Dorset Square.
- It was also a fairly lively time for student politics – this was the time you may recall when Jack Straw was an up and coming leading light in the NUS. I was a member of the Women's Liberation Society. And Bedford College Students Union events included street theatre in the Marylebone Road protesting about Well, I'm not sure I can remember now what we were protesting about exactly.....
- I remember evenings organised by the Progressive Film Society – watching *Bicycle Thieves* in Tuke Hall – and going off to see *A Clockwork Orange* in Leicester Square – first time around.

- And some delightful days sitting on the grass outside the Students Union common room, revising in the summer sunshine.
- Some formative personal experiences and some enduring friendships – the best of which are still with me today.

Life since graduation

Thinking back to those times led me to reflect on the road I've travelled from Regent's Park to Millbank Tower – and my current role. My family has a long public service tradition so it's not surprising that I started my career – after a brief skirmish with the financial services sector - as a graduate trainee in local government.

In my early years in the **London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Islington**, I worked with homeless families living in bed and breakfast hotels in north London and as a housing manager in Kings Cross.

That took me to the **Housing Corporation** and housing associations where I learnt a lot about the workings of Whitehall which was to stand me in good stead for later years. I also developed a particular interest in special needs housing – and that brought me into contact with the charitable and voluntary sectors.

After 10 years in social housing, I became **Chief Executive of the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux** – now Citizens Advice - the umbrella body providing all the support services to the CAB Service – information, training of advisers, monitoring of standards of advice – and of course social policy work - ensuring that CAB clients' experience is fed back to policy makers and service providers to improve the quality of future service provision.

My 7 years with the CAB Service reinforced the views I had begun to develop in my local government and social housing years – of the need for a joined up approach to the development and delivery of public services – in housing, health and social care, welfare benefits, debt advice and so on. And of the need to ensure that feedback about clients' experiences similarly happens in a joined up way.

My next move in 1997 was to become **Legal Services Ombudsman for England and Wales** where I dealt with complaints about lawyers – solicitors, barristers, legal executives – where I learnt my trade as an Ombudsman. I also learnt a great deal about the difficulties that can arise when issues of professional conduct and discipline become entangled with complaints about the quality of service delivery. When I became Health Service Ombudsman, a friend of mine told me that I should view my experience of dealing with complaints about the legal profession as the *'nursery slopes for the National Health Service'*. The experience of the last 12 months suggests that she was probably right – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

On 4 November 2002 I became **Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman** – and I am speaking to you today with the benefit of all of 16 months in the role. So whereas I can't get away with the suggestion that what I say this afternoon amounts to nothing more than 'first impressions', I'm still more in the mode of setting out my manifesto than imparting the wisdom of a decade's experience in the role. Ask me back in ten years and I'll happily do the latter.

Background – the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

Of course, when I was partaking of the pleasures of life at Bedford College in the early 1970s the Office of Parliamentary Ombudsman had already been established. In 1967 the Parliamentary Commissioner Act was passed and by the time I started my studies in September 1971 the first Parliamentary Ombudsman, Sir Edmund Compton (the former Comptroller and Auditor General) had completed his term of office. When I graduated in 1974 the Office of Health Service Ombudsman was emerging onto the scene and the under-employed Parliamentary Ombudsman was given the job.

The idea behind the establishment of the Ombudsman was that the Legislature should be able to keep a check on the Executive. As many saw it at the time, the Ombudsman was to be an expensive research assistant to Members of Parliament and would help them to deal with difficult and seemingly intractable complaints from constituents alleging that they had been badly treated by state institutions. In no way would the Ombudsman threaten the traditional role of MPs and they alone would grant or deny their constituents access to the Ombudsman's services.

The original Ombudsman concept - that citizens need an independent and impartial means of resolving disputes and providing redress when things go wrong - was, perhaps, not uppermost in the Parliamentarians' minds. Neither was the idea that public service providers could profitably learn the lessons from complaints so that services could be improved. At least, this was not apparent in the legislation that established the Offices of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioners for England, Wales and Scotland.

The Ombudsman's remit was based around investigation of complaints of maladministration or service failure and the provision of redress for those whose complaints the Ombudsman upheld.

There was no provision in the Parliamentary Commissioner Act for the Ombudsman even to send the complainant a copy of the results of the investigation into his or her own complaint.

Everything was to be done through the MP and it was entirely a matter for the MP whether the complainant ever got to know the results of the investigation. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that in the early days the Parliamentary Ombudsman's customers were considered to be MPs and this view continued for many years.

Jurisdictional developments

The Parliamentary Ombudsman's remit has changed in two main ways since 1967. Many more public bodies have been brought within jurisdiction as the shape and nature of Government departments and agencies has changed.

And in 1994 the Ombudsman took on responsibility for monitoring the Code on Access on Government Information, thus adding an important new area of work to the usual fare of complaints about maladministration. This work will continue until the Freedom of Information Act is fully implemented in January 2005 and the Information Commissioner takes on his statutory responsibilities in this area.

On the health side of the Office things changed significantly in 1996 when the Ombudsman's jurisdiction was extended to include complaints about family health service practitioners and the care and treatment of patients. The idea that the Ombudsman could consider the professional judgment of clinicians was a new one and involved much painstaking groundwork by the Ombudsman with the various professional organisations concerned.

There had never been an MP filter to stand between the citizen and the Health Service Ombudsman but the Health Service Commissioner Act 1996 required complainants to have "invoked and exhausted" the NHS complaints procedure before

approaching the Ombudsman. In due course – as the complaints procedure was long and winding – literally exhausted complainants began to appear at the Ombudsman’s door or, rather, their letters began appearing in the in-tray. Now over 85% of complaints involve the care and treatment of patients and my office has a strong in-house team of clinicians from a range of disciplines, supported by a pool of external professional advisers, who advise me and my staff on the clinical care aspects of complaints.

In April we shall see a new NHS complaints procedure for complainants to navigate before they come to us. The reforms that are now in the process of being implemented have the potential to bring about significant improvements – but there is a long way to go to achieve real change in the experience of patients and their families when making a complaint.

Devolution and beyond

I am the eighth Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. In November 2002, I was actually appointed to four statutory posts: Parliamentary Ombudsman (for the UK), Health Service Ombudsman for England, Health Service Ombudsman for Wales, and Welsh Administration Ombudsman, with responsibility for considering complaints about devolved public bodies in Wales.

A separate Public Service Ombudsman in Scotland took up her post just two months prior to my appointment, which meant that I did not also have my predecessor’s responsibilities in relation to complaints about the NHS or devolved institutions north of the border. But four hats are probably enough!

While my responsibilities in relation to complaints about the NHS are now restricted to England, as Parliamentary Ombudsman I receive complaints from people resident in England, Wales, Scotland **and** Northern Ireland in relation to:

- Taxation
- Immigration
- Social security (*note: not NI*)
- legal aid
- and all the other Whitehall departments, agencies, quangos and other public bodies in my jurisdiction – roughly 228 in all.

You might think that this adds up to an overwhelming responsibility. It certainly is a challenge – not least because of the range of different complaints that come our way.

I wonder how all of you would respond if I asked you to give some examples of the sort of complaints you think my office deals with and the organisations and issues that people complain about?

As Sir William Reid, one of my distinguished predecessors, once said *'the work of an Ombudsman can cover matters of slight significance to the service, but of substantial importance to the individual.....and it is surely salutary for an Ombudsman to look at individual complainants' grievances which matter a great deal in their eyes'*. Famously, the activities of the Australian Commonwealth and Armed Forces Ombudsman were once described (by the Australian Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration) as *'fly swatting and only rarely lion-hunting'*. But as Sir William also said – and I'm absolutely with him on this – *'occasionally there will be lions to hunt as well'*. Indeed – at the risk of coming under fire from supporters of the World Wildlife Fund, I might go further and suggest that, from time to time, it could even be appropriate to indulge in a spot of jungle clearance.

My predecessors, albeit fairly quietly and modestly, have done some memorable lion hunting over the years. Ombudsman scholars among you are sure to have heard of the Sachsenhausen case in which Sir Edmund Compton castigated the Foreign Office for their refusal to pay the compensation claims of a number of British citizens imprisoned at Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp near Berlin, on the grounds that there was no clear evidence that they had been '*victims of Nazi persecution*'.

In 1989 Sir Anthony Barrowclough's report of his investigation into the Barlow Clowes financial scandal led – eventually – to payment of a total of some £150 million in compensation to thousands of investors.

Then there was the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS). Sir Michael Buckley reported in 2000, with a follow up report a year later, on the government's scheme for redress following his finding of maladministration on the part of what was then the Department for Social Security. The Office had received 344 complaints about SERPS inheritance provisions and investigated a representative sample. The results of the investigation touched the lives of thousands of married couples who had planned for their financial future on the basis of incorrect information disseminated by the Department for Social Security.

If I asked you to come up with some more recent examples of the sorts of issues and complaints my office deals with, you might think of the Inland Revenue and new tax credits; you might have been aware of complaints being made about Customs and Excise seizing cars thought to be involved in smuggling excessive amounts of alcohol and cigarettes – and holding on to them for months on end (the cars that is, not the alcohol and cigarettes); you might know about delays at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; you might have heard about people having problems with computers at the Criminal Records Bureau; or the Legal Services Commission; or the Child Support Agency – or just about anywhere else for that matter.

You'd probably know a bit about our work on NHS funding for the long term care for elderly and disabled people following the enormous amount of publicity that was generated by our special report in February of last year which triggered over 3,000 complaints to my Office. If you read *The Guardian* you'll probably have seen something about our work on monitoring the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information – especially when the information related to Ministers and had the potential to embarrass the Government. What you read might not have been entirely accurate, but you would have seen something about this aspect of our work all the same.

But what you probably would not appreciate in full is the extent of our work beyond the major customers of the Department for Work and Pensions, the Inland Revenue, the Home Office and the NHS.

Some cases make you weep:

- The complaint from the family of the 19 year old young man who killed himself after five days in prison custody, after being left locked alone in his cell for just an hour after the removal of his cell mate, despite the best efforts of prison staff to have regard to his recognised vulnerability.
- The woman whose husband suffered a heart attack on New Year's Eve. After waiting nearly two hours for an ambulance that had been requested urgently by the GP, her husband walked down four flights of stairs and across 50 metres of snow-covered ground to the ambulance. He died two days later in hospital.
- The complaint from the aunt – the only living relative - of a young woman, who suffered from learning disabilities and epilepsy, and was unable to speak or communicate in writing; who was admitted to hospital, aged 11, for an assessment of her health needs; the assessment was intended to be on a short term basis with the local authority social services department taking responsibility for her long term care following

the assessment and the identification of a suitable residential placement for her. This young woman remained in the hospital for 11 years, during which time she was sexually assaulted by a member of the hospital staff – probably on more than one occasion – before a suitable residential placement was found for her.

Every case is unique – but some are more unusual than others – and all the complainants are the Ombudsman’s customers:

- The UFO buff who complained that the Ministry of Defence refused to release information about the Rendlesham Forest Incident – a cause célèbre in the annals of unidentified aerial phenomena. As a result of our investigation three documents were made available to the complainant and subsequently to others who had unsuccessfully applied for it in the past.
- The driving instructor who asked the Driving Standards Agency for information about the test routes used at his local driving test centre so that he could ensure he met the DSA requirements to avoid over-familiarising his test candidates with the routes in use; he complained to us when the DSA wouldn’t give him the information; and as a result it is now standard practice for driving test centres to display information about their test routes.
- The family who complained that during the foot and mouth epidemic DEFRA failed to respond to their request to have the family pet – a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig – destroyed by their own vet rather than by a DEFRA official.

If you look back over the years – and indeed at the current caseload – farming (and possibly fishing) related complaints probably merit a specialist lecture in their own right – from salmonella and the compulsory slaughter of chickens in the 1980s; to Ostrich farming in the 1990s (unhappy investors rather than farmers on this occasion); to delays in 2000 in paying EC subsidies to arable farmers; to the more recent problems of foot and mouth disease.

We're also currently dealing with a clutch of cases that have their origins in the Icelandic cod wars of the 1970s.

These people are all the Ombudsman's customers.

The Ombudsman's customers

This brings me then to the question posed in the title of this lecture:

Who are the Ombudsman's customers?

There are a number of approaches to this question.

The interview answer

When I attended the interview for this post, the first question I was asked – by Dr Tony Wright MP, the Chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee – was exactly that: 'Who are the Ombudsman's customers?'

One of my Ombudsman colleagues – who works in a slightly different field from me – gives a talk from time to time to various groups of stakeholders in which he addresses exactly this question and his response is that an Ombudsman only has one customer – and that is 'justice'. I don't disagree with that. It's a good answer – and has the attraction of also being a short one. But I think if I were to stop there you might feel a little short-changed.

My answer takes a little longer – and meanders round a little - and before I come to it, I'd like to go back to 1967 and the context in which my Office was created.

The context

The circumstances in which any institution and office are created have an obvious impact on its role, the powers available to it, and the way in which those powers are exercised.

The Office of Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has its roots in the early 1960s that culminated in the 1966 Bill to establish an independent Parliamentary officeholder – a Crown Servant responsible to The Queen through Parliament - to consider complaints about the use and abuse of the administrative power of central government.

I suppose it goes without saying that the world was a very different place then – then there were no tuition fees, maintenance grants were available to most students, and higher education was the preserve of a much smaller section of society.

The political context today would be unrecognisable to those who introduced the Bill and who were familiar with the society into which the Ombudsman concept was introduced in the UK.

The Bill to establish the Ombudsman's office was also brought before Parliament only four months after a famous World Cup victory. Those of you who follow the game with the other shaped ball might draw some parallels then with this evening's event.

However, that apart, the office was born into a socio-economic context in the late 1960s that was wholly different to the one we are used to today.

There was a great degree of deference among citizens – not that that concept had much currency then – towards politics, politicians, and institutions like the civil service and the professions. It was not terribly British to complain. Sometimes I wonder whether this has changed much at all.

As my immediate predecessor, Sir Michael Buckley, noted in a recent article reflecting on his time as Ombudsman, the way in which the office of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has developed owed much to the attitude of mind prevalent among those in 1966 who drafted the legislation:

the work of the Ombudsman was something that concerned politicians, senior bureaucrats and public service managers, not ordinary people... the philosophy of the 1967 Act was that once members of the public had agreed to their complaint being referred to the Ombudsman they dropped out of the picture entirely... if the citizenry [did] not show much enthusiasm for the product, that indicate[d] [to them] not that the product or system need[ed] to be changed but that the citizenry need[ed] to be re-educated by better publicity or otherwise.

The world today is a very different place – or at least I would hope that it is!

We now have much more focus on the ‘citizen as consumer’, with rising expectations of the standards acceptable from those providing the public services they pay for. Public satisfaction with public services is a key driver of the modernising government agenda, which seeks to join-up service provision and to place the consumer – the citizen – at the heart of service planning and delivery.

MPs still have a vital part to play in ensuring that citizens are able to secure access to credible mechanisms to secure redress for poor service. However, it is the needs of those *using* the public services – and who, when things go wrong, complain – who now are the prime focus of Ombudsmen.

So who uses OPHSO's service?

The statistical answer

If an Ombudsman's prime focus is to be on those who use its service, then as far as OPHSO is concerned:

- my office received about 6,000 complaints in total last year, approximately half related to care and treatment by the NHS and half to injustice caused by maladministration by central government;
- **of the Health cases,**
 - 39% were about hospital in-patient care;
 - 18% were about GP services;
 - 14 % were about accident and emergency or hospital out-patient care;
 - 7% were about mental health care.
 - 34% of new health complaints last year were prompted by our special report into NHS funding for continuing care for elderly and disabled people. (My office has forwarded those complaints to the relevant NHS bodies to review in the light of my report.)
 - 86% of all health complaints concerned matters of clinical judgment.

- **of Parliamentary cases,**
 - 31% were complaints about the Department for Work and Pensions and its agencies – largely to do with old age and war pensions, social security benefits, or child support maintenance.
 - A further 9% were related to the regulation of Equitable Life; (I published a report of my representative investigation in June 2003.)
 - 8% were about the Inland Revenue
 - 7% were about agriculture
 - and a further 7% were about immigration services.
- The number of complaints about access to government information remained steady at just under the 50 mark.

Some of you may be wondering why I received only 6,000 complaints. Each year, there are millions of episodes of care provided by the NHS; millions of us have dealings with the Inland Revenue or with the Pension Service. Ombudsmen are, of course, a 'last resort'. I have always said that it should be the goal of a modern Ombudsman to put herself out of business. Complaints should always be handled promptly and efficiently at the lowest possible level. As an Ombudsman I can happily support the subsidiarity principle.

The complaints that come to me tend to be those that have exhausted internal complaints procedures; and the most intractable or complex ones where trust has broken down between the parties for whatever reason. Many others will have been resolved locally or by internal independent review. That, however, is only a partial explanation.

Which leads me to...

The research based answer

In order to find out more about who comes to Ombudsmen – and who does not – last year I commissioned, together with my local government Ombudsmen colleagues, some research from MORI about awareness of public sector Ombudsmen among the public and among the advice sector.

The key findings of this research were:

- that over half of those questioned say have never heard of any of the Ombudsmen (this was especially true among young people, black and minority ethnic groups, and unskilled and unemployed people);
- that most advisory bodies – such as my old friends in the CAB Service - do not feel as well informed as they would like to be about the Ombudsmen;
- that there is a desire among both the public and advisers to receive more information about how to contact the Ombudsmen, under what circumstances, and what the Ombudsmen can achieve for them.

However, it was another finding that was particularly revealing to me.

MORI found that three-quarters of those questioned had at some time complained to one of the organisations within our jurisdiction about the way that they have been treated. Of complainants, 48% said that they were dissatisfied with the final outcome of their complaint.

Did they then come to us Ombudsmen? No.

- 47% of dissatisfied complainants then gave up straight away, with only 2% saying they contacted an Ombudsman.
- A quarter of respondents also said they had at one time wanted to make a complaint, but had not done so. The main reasons cited for not complaining are that 'it would not have done any good' or that they 'could not be bothered'.

These two reasons are clearly linked, and qualitative research has shown that experience of complaining unsuccessfully in the past also has an impact on whether people will make a complaint. Our research also highlighted the sense that those most vulnerable – often those most reliant on public services – can be put off from making a complaint in case this affects the standard of service they receive in the future or their relationship with the service provider.

It is therefore important to consider not only our existing customers but also those who currently do not use our service and whom we are not reaching at the moment.

What we want to develop is a modern Ombudsman service that is accessible to all, and especially to those who are likely to need us most.

Towards a modern Ombudsman service

So what exactly is a modern Ombudsman's service?

I believe that there are four themes that should underpin such a service:

- **accessibility:** that all concerned - the Ombudsmen, the Government, Parliament, the devolved institutions, public bodies generally - should work together towards providing an easily accessible service for all public service complaints, underpinned by shared principles and procedures and common redress mechanisms;

- **flexibility:** that the Ombudsmen should work together and with others in partnership to provide a more 'joined-up' service to the public, including where appropriate co-operation with other Ombudsmen and internal complaints handlers;
- **responsiveness:** that the Ombudsmen should contribute to the provision of a responsive service by ensuring that lessons learned from casework are fed back to policy makers and to service providers, with the goal of improving service delivery;
- **improving quality:** that the Ombudsmen should secure continuous improvement to become and remain centres of administrative excellence and expertise in complaints handling.

How is this to be done? I would suggest in three main ways:

- **First, by providing information and advice and promoting good practice:**
 - a modern Ombudsman service provides advice about good administration and good complaint handling to service providers. The European Ombudsman has published a Code of Good Administrative Behaviour which identifies the components of good public administration – fairness, objectivity, impartiality, proportionality, lawfulness, absence of discrimination and so on. I'm very much drawn to this positive approach of defining good administration – which gives us all a standard against which we can then measure service quality - rather than trying to define maladministration. Previous attempts to define maladministration have had their limitations and in today's world I don't think that the 'you know it when you see it' approach will stand up to much scrutiny - so I am considering

whether I might develop something similar to the European Ombudsman's Code.

- The English Local Government Ombudsmen issue annual letters to local councils drawing their attention to the key themes and lessons learned from the complaints they have received about them – and we are considering whether we might do something similar with the permanent secretaries of the departments who are our most regular customers.
- We will also continue to promote local resolution of most complaints and good practice in complaint handling within departments, agencies and the NHS;
- A modern Ombudsman also provides clear and user-friendly advice about what to do when things go wrong to members of the public/service users. Given what MORI have found, we are planning how best to reach out to marginalised social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups and others who do not use our service.
- We also intend to promote greater awareness of our service among the professional advice sector but also among others to whom citizens may turn for advice (MPs, pressure groups, churches, GPs etc).
- **Secondly, by providing an exemplary complaints handling service to our own customers** – a modern Ombudsman will design and deliver a complaints system that:
 - is accessible to all (with no unnecessary barriers and direct access to our service);
 - is customer-focused and responsive;
 - is fair, independent and impartial;
 - is speedy and flexible (and tailors our process and outcomes to the circumstances of each case).

- **Thirdly, by providing feedback and promoting improvement**
a modern Ombudsman:
 - feeds back the lessons learned from casework to service providers and to policy makers; and
 - advocates improvements in service delivery thereby contributing to continuous improvement in public administration.

Our customers are not just those people whose complaints are currently under consideration by my Office, although it is still vitally important that we continue to improve our service to them, too.

So who are the Ombudsman's customers?

The final answer

In my concept of a modern Ombudsman service the Ombudsman's customers are:

- the general public – by promoting improvements in public services, the Ombudsman should have an impact on *everyone* who uses them;
- public service providers including the NHS – by engaging in constructive dialogue about putting the customer at the heart of service provision and about ensuring that complaints are handled appropriately at the local level, the Ombudsman should have an impact on *everyone* who plans and delivers public services – and health care;
- complainants – by ensuring that there is an impartial, fair and independent mechanism to rectify/redress injustice, the Ombudsman should have an impact on *everyone* who experiences poor service; and

- advisers – by engaging with and supporting those who provide assistance and advice to citizens, the Ombudsman should have an impact on the facilitation of a range of support services available to those in need of help; and
- key stakeholders – by providing a modern service that promotes learning from complaints, the Ombudsman should have an impact on Government (policy formulation) and on Parliament (legislation, scrutiny and representation).

Some time ago, I promised you an answer to the question posed of me at my interview. And that was and is my answer – an Ombudsman’s customers are society as a whole and, specifically, all those with an interest in improved public services.

Delivering such a vision is an important task – it is critical if efforts to improve and reform public services are to be successful and if public confidence in them is to be restored – or if you prefer, retained.

Ombudsmen can do much themselves to deliver this and we are planning work to promote more co-operation among Ombudsmen and other complaint handlers in the UK. However, there are some impediments to making this vision a reality, most of them linked to the antiquated legislative framework designed in those far-off days when the England football team had just won a World Cup.

Direct access has yet to be delivered. MPs play an important role in supporting their constituents when they have problems with public service providers and I believe that will always be the case. But I do not believe that in the 21st century it is acceptable for citizens not to have direct access to an Ombudsman service.

Devolution and decentralisation – both institutionally and in terms of service delivery – pose challenges, as does the need for coherent complaints handling in an era of multi-agency service provision and joined-up government.

The Cabinet Office review of public sector ombudsmen set out one way to remove these constraints – in part by institutional reform; in part by reviewing and modernising the legislative framework within which Ombudsmen work. However, institutional solutions are an incomplete answer – and there is no foreseeable prospect of parliamentary time to enact the necessary changes!

I will continue to press for legislative change to address some of these problems. At the same time other changes are required which are perhaps no less difficult than bringing about changes in the law, but possibly more within our gift. They include cultural change, customer-centred focus and recognition of the need to work together in a post-devolution diverse United Kingdom.

In my view, the key priorities are thus:

- internal to OPHSO – we must work to ensure that we can deliver a modern service;
- (culture of) government – we must secure a cultural shift in attitudes to complaints and to redress;
- key relationships – we must continue to co-operate with other complaint handlers, with service providers, with advice sector and representative organisations, with stakeholders to promote the importance of (and to deliver) good administration.

Only then will we have delivered a service of which we can be proud and in which the customer – that's all of you – is at the centre.

Conclusion

I said, somewhat flippantly, at the start of this talk that few of my memories of Bedford College had any connection with my academic studies. And you might be forgiven for thinking that the career path I subsequently followed did not draw heavily on what I learnt between 1971 and 1974 about the poetry of Goethe or the novels of Thomas Mann; or indeed the philosophies of Descartes and Immanuel Kant.

However, I see that Enid Lakeman graduated in 1926 with a degree in Chemistry – which clearly equipped her well for a career in electoral and political reform – so I am in good company.

And of course you would be wrong to see no connection between my studies at Bedford College and where I've ended up professionally. Because language and logic are of course the tools of my trade as an Ombudsman. I remember the first time that I had an essay returned to me with the comment '*clear, concise, persuasive*' written at the top of it and the satisfaction that gave me. I can't remember what the essay was about, but that doesn't matter. I knew I had found something I was good at and something I enjoyed.

The key components of an Ombudsman's report are solidly researched evidence, sound analysis, and properly reasoned conclusions – all of which must be clearly and concisely articulated. Where better to learn those disciplines than in an academic environment?

Added to those disciplines is a strong commitment to independence; and public service. Whether it's the Inland Revenue or the Child Support Agency, or the National Health Service, I want to see customer-focused public servants delivering a high quality service – doing it well and getting it right - for the benefit of their customers – and getting satisfaction from doing so. That's my passion. And I couldn't be better placed to pursue it than in my current role.

I said to the panel at my interview that I thought being Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman was the dream job in the public sector. And 16 months in I'm even more convinced that it's true.

So, before I finish, it only remains for me to say thank you to Bedford College for all it did for me; thank you to Enid Lakeman and the Electoral Reform Society for creating the Lakeman Lecture series; and thank you again to Royal Holloway and Bedford College for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts and ideas with everyone here this afternoon.

Thank you.

Ann Abraham
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
4 March 2004