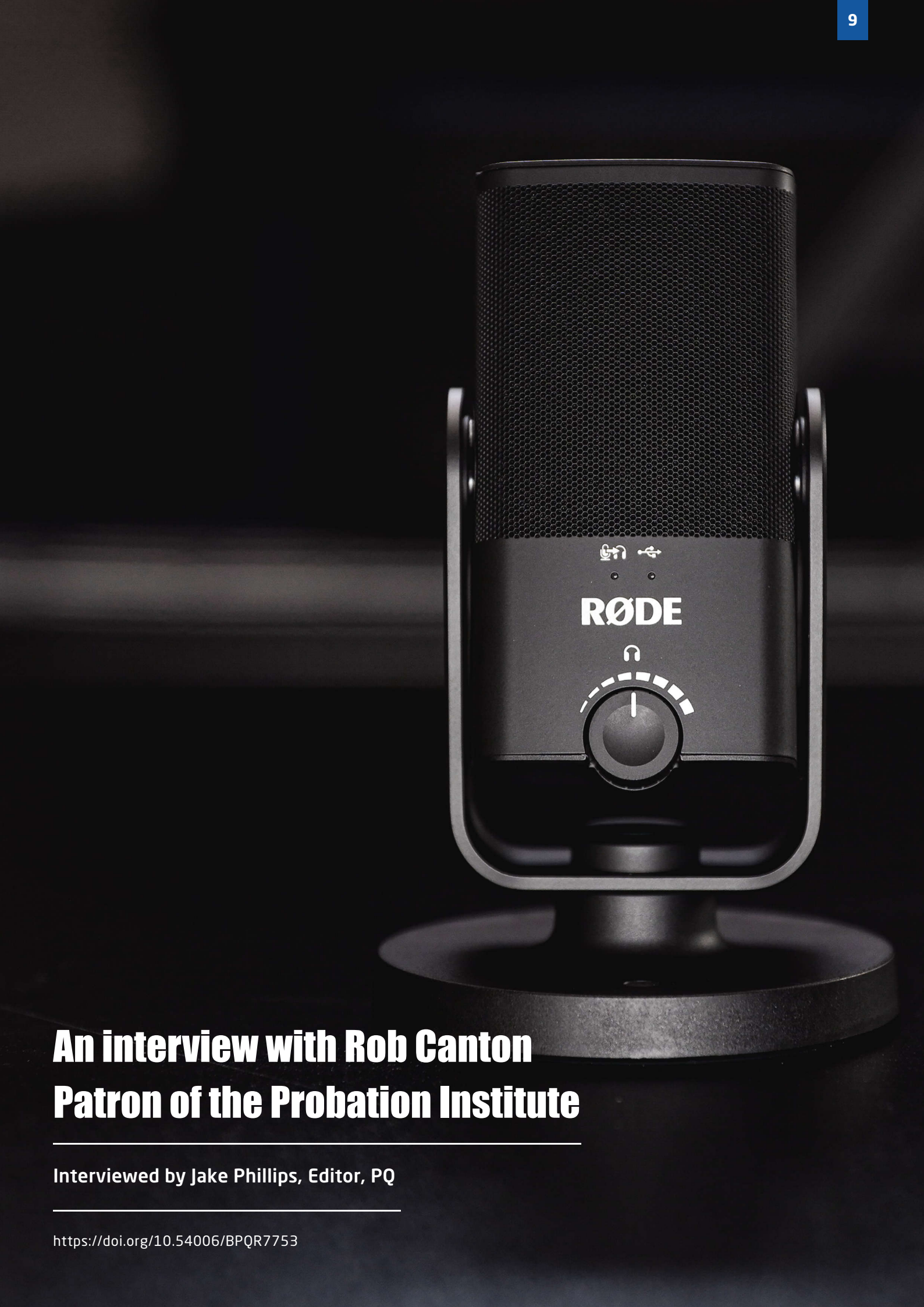

An interview with Rob Canton Patron of the Probation Institute

Interviewed by Jake Phillips, Editor, PQ

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1. You have been the Patron of PI for around a year now. You were awarded this role in recognition of the contribution you've made to the field of probation studies over a long career but I'd like to start at the beginning: what got you into probation in the first place?

As an undergraduate, I studied Latin and Greek, Ancient History and Philosophy. I enjoyed these studies very much and they have enriched my life in any number of ways. But they pointed towards no particular career path and when I graduated I had nothing more than the vaguest idea that I might like to do something to help people in difficulty. I rang Social Services, but ran out of coins at the payphone before they could find anyone to speak to me! I phoned up the local probation service and was offered an appointment with the Chief Officer the very next day and on the spot he offered me a role working in a voluntary sector hostel for people just coming out of prison. I worked there for just over a year, living in a flat on the premises, and I absolutely loved it. We weren't far away from Grendon. Some of our residents had spent time there and in fact we aspired to being a therapeutic community - even though none of us on the staff had any knowledge or experience of what this really meant. There were also men from Broadmoor and these experiences gave me a career long interest in criminal justice and mental health. We had a lot to do with the local probation staff, of course, and I decided to apply to be a trainee probation officer. I studied for the MA / CQSW at the University of Nottingham - a city I didn't know at all then, but where I have now lived for 45 years.

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2. And how did you then end up working in the university/doing research?

When I qualified, I worked as a probation officer in and around Nottingham for nine years. I'd never been particularly attracted to management roles (perhaps I was scared of them?), but I became a practice teacher and thoroughly enjoyed this work. So when they advertised for the position of Senior Probation Officer in the Home Office Student Unit, I applied and was given that position. After about a year, Nottingham University got in touch with me and asked me if I would like to teach criminology. Their only criminologist had just left; they didn't want to appoint another, but they were keen to offer this subject to their students. I taught this on my own for a year, with students from Law as well as Social Policy, and found it both challenging and rewarding. It was tough to fit in around a full-time job, but with support I managed to make it work.

After that first year, I was joined by staff from the Law School and over several years did joint teaching with them. Some years later, Charlotte Knight at De Montfort, who was to become a good friend and mentor, commissioned me to write a training manual for the Home Office on working with 'Mentally Disordered Offenders' (an expression I now dislike). When the Diploma in Probation Studies was introduced, I went to work in the Midlands Consortium and made connections with a number of universities across the region. After a couple of years, De Montfort, for whom I had already been teaching a module on 'Penal Policy', advertised for staff to deliver their probation programme and I was appointed in 2001. I have always enjoyed writing, although I am not very accomplished in empirical research. Anyway, on the strengths of international work and a few publications, I was appointed Professor in 2007. This may have been too early for me, but I think I grew into the role and helped DMU to achieve its present standing in probation teaching and scholarship.

3. What do you think counts as good quality probation practice? How can probation do good for people on probation and the communities it serves?

In its first incarnation in 2001, the National Probation Service took as its watchwords 'enforcement, rehabilitation and public protection'. Now each of these terms says something about what probation should be doing, but this sometimes obscures crucial questions about how it goes about its work. And by how I don't just mean methods and techniques, for all their undoubted importance. Good quality probation practice should have an unwavering regard for the interests of people under supervision. Sometimes their interests - and certainly their expressed preferences - may have to give way to the rights and interests of other people, but there is no time at which probation staff should fail to show respect and care for them. I would be prepared to defend the idea that probation should be a caring profession.

In the last four years or so, I have become particularly interested in the concept of care and have written about it with my friend, Jane Dominey - who, incidentally, was appointed at De Montfort on the same day that I was. It has become a very unfashionable word in probation terminology, hasn't it? But I think its meaning and significance are misunderstood. Notably, the antithesis between care and control is a conceptual confusion. (For that matter, while it is a legitimate penal aim to prevent people from behaving in certain ways, is it justifiable to try to 'control' them? Control, particularly when used coercively, is rightly deplored.) I'm trying to write something about this at the moment. And although political discourse often sets the interests of people on probation against communities, most of the time their interests are much the same. People on probation (present and past) should be regarded as *members of the community,* even though their acceptance and inclusion often fall short, and respected accordingly. Again, even when their motivation is wobbly and they can't see how to stay out of trouble, most people want to desist and this is naturally what the community wants too.

Once we resist attempts to reduce people to their worst conduct, it should become obvious that people on probation, including those leaving prison, are in many respects much the same as any other cross-section of humanity. They have strengths, skills and experiences (including their experiences of prison and probation) which could be put to use creatively not only to help other people in trouble, but more generally to enrich our communities. Probation can work to remove obstacles to these potential contributions to the benefit of their clients and the communities they serve.

4. What are the main challenges for probation at the moment?

One conspicuous challenge has been the signs of a return of penal policy to the foreground of political dispute. For rather more than a decade, party political conflict has chosen other arenas, but there have been recent rumblings from both parties to claim that their policies will make society safer and deliver justice to wrongdoers. The consequences of this party-politicisation have always been grim for the probation service and all the more unfortunate now that the Probation Service is part of the civil service and consequently, at least in theory, under the immediate direction of government.

For much of my career, I have heard people in probation say that their work is misunderstood and that a prominent challenge is to explain its mission more clearly. It is said that if only the public understood probation's work better, the profession would enjoy more confidence and support. Yet efforts to achieve this have a very long history of disappointment. And I'm afraid I have a gloomier view anyway. For me, perhaps the most important thing about probation is not just what it does in terms of supporting desistance and protecting the public, but what it stands for - its values that should be expressed in and through its practices. These include belief in the possibility of change and that this is best accomplished by social inclusion and giving people fair opportunities to live lives in which offending has no place. And this implies that society has duties towards people attempting to desist. But these values are unfashionable and not easy to articulate even at the best of times. Still, the profession must make its stand for social justice and this will continue to be a prominent challenge.

Among other challenges are the high turnover of staff. A wealth of experience was lost during the turmoil of Transforming Rehabilitation and while no doubt there are new entrants bringing energy and creative new ideas, some are not staying for long. I have heard others express doubts about the motivation of some newcomers for joining in the first place, although one must not become too precious about this: motivations to undertake probation work have always been manifold and mixed.

There are and always have been plenty of other challenges, but one final one to mention here is the importance and difficulty of retaining strong local connections. While the return of the work to the public sector has been rightly celebrated, HMPPS must have the confidence and the trust in its staff to allow diversity in its services to flourish, with a sensitivity to the economic, social and cultural differences in different parts of the country. The principle of responsivity - that individuals are not the same and work must be responsive to that - applies just as much to different areas. This is another aspect of my concern about probation's being part of the civil service.

5. In that context, what advice you give to people thinking about entering the profession?

Working for probation is a wonderful thing. You will be helping some of the most disadvantaged people among us, many of whom have had extraordinarily troubled backgrounds, scarred by all kinds of distress and trauma. The political opposition between 'offenders' and victims can obscure the reality that many people who commit offences have been victims themselves - not just of social injustices, but of crimes committed against them. Supporting desistance is a crucial part of making society safer. This is work in which people may take justifiable pride and some have felt a sense of vocation. At the same time, the work calls for patience and resilience. Clients, as well as the circumstances that so often frustrate their best efforts, can be exasperating. You will often have to be prepared to tolerate uncertainty, yet carry on working purposefully nevertheless. Line managers have their own pressures to deal with and sometimes their instructions may interfere with your idea of the best way to act. Your colleagues will give you strength and comradeship.

6. And what advice would you have for the people who are leading probation?

Politicians should try much harder to avoid making extravagant claims about punishment. The criminal justice system has a useful but essentially minor role in reducing crime. Too many politicians of all varieties give into the temptation to talk up punitivism and try to turn probation into something it isn't, couldn't and shouldn't be.

In some of its recent accounts of recall practices, the Inspectorate has remarked that probation is risk averse. This is hardly surprising! Staff need to be confident that not only their line managers, but also politicians will stand up for them in difficult circumstances. The trouble, of course, is that probation work usually becomes visible to the public only in (what are presented as) its failures - not all of which can be reasonably attributed to probation in any case. Its (innumerable) achievements and the quality of its practice should be more confidently affirmed.

Senior managers must trust their staff. Practitioners should be well educated to undertake their work and then allowed the space to do it. It is not true that increased discretion must lead to discriminatory practice or that it dilutes accountability.

I'd like to offer a final piece of advice here, if I may. There are encouraging signs that probation is at least trying to learn from the experiences of those who have used / are using its services. And there is much more to be done here. Too often probation staff at all levels have been beguiled by their own good intentions into supposing that their work is experienced in the manner intended. Client testimony is showing clearly that it is much harder than this and that some people see probation as intrusive, obstructive and vexatious. It should be none of these things. Probation staff have their duties, as service users recognise, but how these responsibilities are discharged makes a considerable difference.

7. I know you don't have a crystal ball but what do you think the future holds for probation?

Those who know me are aware that my predictive powers are notoriously feeble, so maybe it would be wiser for me to talk about hopes. Hopes include the possibility that the unkindness and hostility that has marked so much political debate over the past decade will begin to cool down a bit. Where there is anger, people who have committed crimes represent a time-honoured, ready focus for resentment and this has implications for the probation service, which will struggle to hold onto its traditional values in such a political climate. 'Talking up' the significance of punishment in response to perceptions of increases in crime also makes it much harder for probation to achieve its aims of rehabilitation and public protection.

There may be times when we might long for some respite from the buffeting of unceasing change. Yet, as the cliché has it, the only constant is change. Perhaps the greatest harm done by the project of Transforming Rehabilitation is that the changes of governance and management and the introspection that all that entailed held probation back from making progress in its practices. Members of the Probation Service include people with potential to innovate and to envisage different and better ways of working and I very much hope that they will be afforded opportunities to do this and not find themselves having to be preoccupied with organisational changes.

Some believe that the practices of probation to which I remain committed are obsolescent if not obsolete. I continue to hold onto the belief that work with people under supervision should be marked by respect for them, patience, kindness and good humour. In fact, I doubt that it is possible to do the job at all in any other way.

And I firmly believe that working in this way is much the most likely way of bringing about the goals of rehabilitation and public protection that the service sets for itself. To help people to become their best you must treat them well. I suspect that all our life experiences teach us this. I hope that probation leaders and politicians will find the courage to affirm this or at least to reject the cruel, destructive and criminogenic punitivism that the politicians and the media so often conjure.

8. And, finally, what role does the Probation Institute have in all of this?

I am honoured to be Patron of the Institute and I share its aspirations. Even so, readers should be aware that I am expressing my own views in answering this question (and all the others) – not speaking on behalf of the Institute. The Institute works hard and has achieved a great deal. It encourages its members to contribute to its responses to government consultations; it sets out its position in a series of papers; it organises events and professional discussions; it has an active research committee; and it publishes the excellent *Probation Quarterly.* For its size and resources, it is, as the expression has it, 'punching above its weight'. At the same time, its influence is modest and perhaps it has yet to discover its full potential.

I know that discussions are taking place in HMPPS about professional registration and if a register of probation professionals is to be established, a further question arises about who is to be its custodian. Central government and the civil service may not be best for this and the Institute may have a contribution to make here.

Probably the biggest challenge for the Institute is to increase its membership. Many new entrants into the profession will want to join the trade union. The advantages of joining Napo will be immediately clear to them, but perhaps the case for membership of the Institute will be less apparent. I was proud to be a member of Napo for more than twenty years and it was only my own change of profession that led me to leave. Napo is a professional association, but it is a trade union as well and the priority of any trade union must be to work in the interests of its members - especially, perhaps, in negotiating their salaries and conditions of service. The Institute on the other hand should have regard to the well-being of the profession of probation - a subtle but significant difference, I think. There will be many occasions when Napo and the Institute will be advocating the same or similar things, but I believe that the Institute can find a distinct space. One way of thinking about this might be to say that the Probation Service, the Probation Institute and Napo have a shared interest in enhancing the policies and practices of probation, even though their roles and contributions are very different. At best, perhaps, they may provide checks and balances to one another to bring about a safer and fairer society, as well as benefits to probation, those who use its services and its own staff.

I have mentioned the shortage of champions of probation and this is a role that the Institute must occupy. The perils here are that being a champion involves the courage to take risks and in a volatile political debate one salient risk is that an unpopular position will be disregarded or scorned. For example, your question could be about what role the Institute can play in supporting the Service to achieve its aims. But these aims are given to it by government and there may be occasions when the Institute should be asking the Service to think differently about its aims and how they may be advanced. There will and should be disagreement and neither the Institute nor the Service should be alarmed about this. I suspect that through these discussions, including respectful disagreements, the Probation Service, the Institute and Napo are all more likely to thrive.