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Carrots, Sticks and too many Targets

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Welcome to 2003 'UK style' - a nation of target toting under achievers. And, if you aren't already feeling guilty, James Strachan's recent public condemnation of our "*slavish devotion*" to benchmarks and all that goes with them, should now have you looking shamefaced at your own lengthening list of aims and objectives.

Of course it is always nice when someone as high profile as Mr Audit Commission himself puts his head above the parapet – even if he is telling us something we already know. Even better when he is joined – as he has been - by that unlikelyst of bedfellows in the form of the Fabian Society, as it too decries the current approach to public service reform. But the question is, will all the rhetoric really change a political psychology hell bent on making us perform like monkeys.

Targets, like New Year resolutions have a time and a place. And, like those personal promises to lose weight and quit smoking, we all know that only the most committed masochists survive the first three weeks. Now, before you all round on me to highlight the dangers of professional complacency let me make this clear. I'm not arguing for a target free haven for the public sector rather I'm saying that when I work with a bunch of planning professionals, and see them groaning under 75 different targets, I just know that something has gone seriously wrong. These people are committed to making a difference and they are being treated like idiots. Pity even more the poor local communities hounded to within an inch of their lives to define and uphold the various hoops which the professionals hurl themselves through.

Since amnesties seem to be flavour of the month, maybe it is time to call a halt to the target setting of yesteryear. Imagine the scene as senior managers from across health, education, environment and beyond creep furtively forward to deposit their "waiting list" and "league table" in some suitably brightly coloured wheely bin. Of course reducing the stockpile may not curtail production. More over, there are always those who prefer to retain their secret stash, wedded as they are to a regime



where the stick will always out weigh the carrot. In such contexts it may be helpful to reflect on a recent New Year address from Olympian runner and New York Marathon marvel Marla Runyan, who is both a world class athlete and officially blind. When asked why and how she ran so competitively, she had one very simple response – “*I just can't see the finish line*”.