

Think of Conservative policy on prisons and the image that comes to mind is of Michael Howard as Home Secretary rallying the troops at his party's conference with the cry that 'prison works'. That catch phrase has now been replaced with the new, softer sounding 'prisons with a purpose'. It's the title of the Conservatives latest policy proposals for reforming the nation's jails. The report is the product of many weeks of consultation and research intended to come up with solutions to chronic overcrowding and stubbornly high reconviction rates.

A glance through the 113 page report and it would appear, at least from many of the headline messages, that David Cameron is shifting Conservative thinking away from the dogmatic 'lock 'em up' agenda of the past to a more enlightened, even progressive prison reform agenda. The talk now is of a 'rehabilitation revolution to break the cycle of crime'; women being held in 'more local units' and 'alternative forms of secure, treatment based accommodation ...for mentally ill and drugs offenders'. The aim is 'the most fundamental shake-up of prisons for two centuries' to bear down on 're-offending' and, so the argument goes, reduce crime.

A more detailed reading of the report reveals that in reality, the Conservatives have not actually changed their minds and still hold dear to the view that 'prison works'. They are trying to repackage their messages to be all about rehabilitation and tackling re-offending. Prison is still seen as the most important punishment for the majority of criminals. In fact the report argues that prison is being reserved for 'serious, violent, persistent offenders' and can be an effective crime reduction tool. It argues that ... 'a new approach should accept the role of prison in dealing with crime in an increasingly violent society.'

This is a naïve, simplistic and misinformed argument. The correlation between prison numbers and crime rates is extremely weak. The assessment by many criminologists is that economic trends, employment levels and relative income inequality, alongside technological developments and broader cultural and social changes, are the main influencers of crime trends. A recently released report from the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit concluded that 80 per cent of the reduction in the official crime rate since 1997 was the result of economic, not



# Rehabilitation revolution



**Enver Solomon, deputy director of the Centre for Crime & Justice Studies, argues that the latest policy proposals from the Conservatives will never be an effective crime prevention tool**

criminal justice interventions. So to focus on prison rehabilitation as a policy lever for tackling crime and victimization is fundamentally flawed.

The report baldly states ... 'half of all crime is committed by previous offenders'. Yet there is no credible evidence to back this up. The reality is that crime is far more common than we think. Nearly all of us have broken the law and committed a crime at some stage in our lives, whether it be not paying tax, committing an insurance fraud or using illegal substances. Many men have assaulted or threatened their wives, partners, friends or acquaintances. What's more, a third of men will have a criminal conviction by the age of 30.

Rather than being an effective means of reducing crime, the evidence suggests that prison is a crime generator as it causes huge social and economic harm to thousands of individuals, families and communities. The Social Exclusion Unit report on Reducing Re-offending by Ex-Prisoners, which the Conservatives quote from, vividly highlights the damage caused by imprisonment by breaking family relationships, leaving many prisoners jobless and homeless on release and without support for mental health and substance misuse needs. Prisons are by their very nature harsh, violent and disturbing places. They never have been and will never be therapeutic environments that heal and repair the multiple social problems which are common amongst the prison population. What's more, the communities that have high imprisonment rates experience social breakdown that weakens the bonds that are protective factors against crime and disorder.

Solutions to reducing crime and promoting public safety lie outside the prison gates and beyond the criminal justice agencies. They are to be found in improved mental health services, drug treatment and alcohol services. Social development initiatives that address exclusion and disadvantage by providing effective support for communities will, in the long run, be far more effective than relying on punishment to stop crime. The Conservatives would be wise to address the need for proportionality in sentencing and move away from a misconceived utilitarian notion that rehabilitation can be used as a crime reduction tool. Of course prisons should seek to assist and support offenders, but they are ultimately places of punishment, not a social service, and so will never be an effective crime reduction tool.

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