

Attitudes to Punishment: Values, Beliefs and Political Allegiance

Rob Allen examines how political parties respond to what they *think* the public thinks about punishment.

Why do some people take a tough and punitive line on crime and others attach more value to prevention and rehabilitation? Psychology suggests that attitudes can be held for instrumental reasons – more prison keeps me safe – others for expressive reasons – more prison gives offenders what they deserve. Whatever the reason, it still comes as something of a surprise to learn that the British public is on the whole not as punitive as one might surmise from the tabloid press.

In the wake of Lord Woolf's controversial guideline judgement at the end of last year, Mori found the public equally split on whether first time burglars should go to prison or do community punishment. This was despite very negative press coverage of the judgement, lukewarm support for non-custodial options from the government and downright hostility from the conservatives. One might have expected a strong majority in favour of imprisonment. Yet the Mori findings reflect the results of surveys carried out for Rethinking Crime and Punishment (RCP) which have found that people don't rate prison highly as a response to crime, and think offenders come out worse than they go in.

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More detailed research has shown that while most people say they want tougher sentences, when confronted with real cases their views are broadly in line with and sometimes more lenient than current sentencing practice.

These aggregate findings of course mask wide variations in attitudes. A review of psychological research for RCP looked at what might lie beneath the variety of attitudes to crime and punishment. It found for example that in times of prosperity and optimism, attitudes to offenders are more sympathetic, and in times of economic crisis less so. Most studies have shown that older people are more punitive than younger and manual occupations more punitive than non-manual. People who fear crime are more likely to think courts lenient and advocate heavier sentences. But surprisingly, victimisation does not seem to effect punitive attitudes.

There are some more predictable links between ideological beliefs and attitudes to crime. Studies, mainly North American, have shown that highly religious people and those with a strong belief in a just world- the belief that good things will happen to good people and bad things will happen to bad

people- held the most punitive attitudes to offenders. Other studies have found that Christian fundamentalism strongly predicted support for the use of punitive criminal justice policies.

Not surprisingly conservative beliefs – measured by agreement with statements endorsing traditional social values- are linked with punitiveness and liberal political views with more lenient attitudes. This is confirmed by detailed analysis of survey data in Britain .The British Social Attitudes Survey in 1999 found that support for stiffer sentences ranged from 59% among salaried liberal democrat voters to 90% among working class conservatives (and , surprisingly, working class liberal democrat supporters). Among labour voters, 70% of salaried, 77% of self-employed and 85% of working-class respondents supported a tougher approach.

A similar pattern was found in Mori's poll on attitudes to burglars. Conservative voters favoured prison by 50% to 41%, liberal democrat voters favoured community service by 54% to 38% while labour supporters were equally divided. When, in work undertaken for RCP, MORI asked if it was a good or a bad idea to reduce the prison population,

they found that respondents intending to vote conservative were more likely to think it a bad idea (53%) than Labour voters (45%) or those supporting other parties (37%).

The values and principles of the different political parties of course predict this kind of distribution of attitudes towards the use of prison. This is shown most starkly at the extremes of the political spectrum as an analysis of recent manifestos and policy documents shows.

On the extreme right the British National Party supports the reintroduction of corporal punishment for persistent criminals and vandals and the restoration of capital punishment for paedophiles, terrorists and murderers as an option for judges. The UK Independence Party supports deterrent sentences but interestingly “do not see the solution simply in terms of building more prisons and locking more people up.”

On the extreme left the Communist Party demands the election of judges and magistrates, workers' supervision of prisons, and paid work, the right to vote and weekly conjugal visits for prisoners. They have little to say about sentencing but the



Shree Swaminarayan Temple in London, the largest Hindu temple outside of India.

Scottish Socialists, successful in the recent elections to the Scottish parliament, pledged to cut down Scotland's prison population by expanding alternatives to custody. Among other parties on the left the Welsh Nationalists stood for "the maximum use of non custodial sentences," while for the Green Party the main objects of sentencing should be reparation to the victim or community and persuading the offender to become a law abiding member of the community. Detention would be available as a sentence in the Crown Court, only when satisfied that the public must be protected because of a substantial risk of a further grave crime or that the offences have caused such public alarm that the offender's own safety would be at risk in the community. Offenders under 18 would not be detained in prison service accommodation.

The positions taken by the three main parties in recent years are somewhat more complex. Central among core Conservative values is responsibility - "Conservatives stand for the rule of law" says their latest position statement. Yet it was a Tory

government who thought prison could be an expensive way of making bad people worse and introduced the 1991 *Criminal Justice Act* to reduce the numbers locked up. Thereafter, the sharp move towards more punitive policies based on the idea that "prison works" was more in line with traditional Conservative law and order thinking. Policies proposed since 2001 contain a good deal more about prevention, rehabilitation and treatment than might have been expected. A Fair Deal for Everyone summarises youth crime policy as "Longer more constructive sentences for persistent young offenders and compulsory rehabilitation for children on drugs" - a shift in a liberal direction.

Labour's values include social justice and the idea of community in which "we live in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect". Traditionally this has led to progressive crime policies. Labour's repositioning on crime in the mid nineties has been well documented (Allen, 2003). "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" led Labour to fight the last election committed to increased punishment for persistent offending. The current position seems confused as the White Paper *Justice for All* describes the record prison population as something that is not working but there are measures in train which look certain to increase it.

For the Liberal Democrats, traditional values of freedom, justice and honesty have become allied with a desire to speak for the have-nots. Their position remains the least punitive with an overarching commitment to prevention, complement-

ed by a desire to increase the use of community sentences and restorative justice. For their spokesman, "simply putting more and more people in prison is not the answer - and is a terribly dangerous and defeatist and negative road to go down."

There is no doubt that in the era of penal populism political parties attach more weight to the electoral advantage of crime policies than to the principles which underlie them or their effectiveness. But electoral considerations have not entirely trumped the core values of political parties and those considerations reflect to an extent the range of attitudes beliefs and values held by the electorate - which encompass prevention as much as punishment.

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References:

Allen, R. 'Talking Tough', *Safer Society*, No 16 Spring 2003.