

The Song Remains the Same

Rob Allen reviews the party positions on criminal justice as we approach this general election.

Among the people certain not to vote on May 5th are the UK's 60,000 plus convicted prisoners. Yet the use of prison and broader responses to crime form an important plank in the manifestos of the three main parties and many of the others too. Almost all of the last Parliament fell under the shadow of September 11th, but terrorism aside, the government found time to enact a raft of crime bills and launch a stream of initiatives. Under the overarching aim of rebalancing justice in favour of the victim we have seen important changes to the laws of evidence, a major push to bring more offenders to justice, Prime Ministerial crackdowns on street crime and anti social behaviour, tougher sentencing provisions for sexual and violent offenders and a campaign to target persistent and prolific offenders. Given the aim, in the government's five-year plan, to bring an end to the sixties liberal consensus on crime, it is not surprising that the numbers in prison have grown by almost 10,000 since the last election, despite a much trumpeted fall in crime. What impact is a new government likely to have?

ASBOs, one has to look to RESPECT for a truly radical proposal. They would scrap ASBOs and reinvest the money in youth clubs.

Offenders are likely to face longer sentences under a Conservative government with the prospect of mandatory minimum terms imposed by the court and an end to the Home Detention Curfew scheme. The 20,000 which 'honesty in sentencing' would add to Labour's target prison population of 80,000 would take England and Wales even further ahead at the top of the league table of jail numbers in Western Europe. A Conservative government would also give Parliament through the Home Affairs Committee the final say on sentencing guidelines and make police commissioners responsible for fine collection. With most of the sentencing provisions of the 2003 Criminal Justice Act implemented only in April, (and *Custody Plus* not yet in force), Labour would concentrate on violent offenders, particularly those convicted of crimes with knives or guns, and introduce more stringent supervision post release and more electronic tagging and drug testing for offenders in the community.

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Whoever wins, we are likely to see a lot more police officers on the beat. All three parties sign up to the idea that if you "put more police on the streets .. they'll catch more criminals. It's not rocket science is it?" (Conservative Manifesto 2005).

All three promise versions of neighbourhood based policing, with Labour taking the number of community support officers to 24,000, the Conservatives funding 5000 more police each year under locally elected commissioners and the Lib Dems using resources set aside for ID cards to increase the wider police family by 30,000. Less paperwork and more local accountability is the order of the day.

The uncompromising approach to anti-social behaviour is likely to be stepped up with Conservative threats to withhold housing benefit from or even imprison the parents of persistent miscreants, Labour plans to make it easier for residents to obtain ASBOs, and the Liberals requiring late night venues to contribute to the cost of policing the problems they create. While the Lib Dems prefer Acceptable Behaviour Contracts to

While the Lib Dems aim to improve alternatives to jail for non-violent offenders through tough community work determined by local panels, it is the Greens who promise more far reaching proposals to replace retributive sentencing with restorative justice, with reparation and mediation at its heart.

Both Labour and Conservative have much to say about drugs, with the former aiming to send a thousand offenders a week into treatment by 2008 and greatly increasing the use of testing at arrest, charge and after release. The latter promise a highly ambitious and expensive tenfold increase in residential drug places which will enable 50,000 young addicts to undergo an intensive six month course. They will reclassify cannabis as a class B drug, while Labour have asked the Advisory Council on Drug Misuse to look at the latest evidence of its harmful effects. The Lib Dems plan to end imprisonment as a punishment for the possession of illegal drugs of any class and develop a system of heroin prescription for addicts, in sharp contrast with the Conservative emphasis on abstinence based programmes. Binge drinking is a target for all three main parties.



Inside prison, under the Lib Dems, prisoners would be expected to work a full day and learn skills which could earn them an early release, while the Conservatives would rely on private companies and charities to improve regimes, with success in reducing reoffending taken into account when awarding new contracts.

There is perhaps surprising consensus that police, courts and prisons pick up the pieces of problems whose roots lie elsewhere, with both Conservatives and Labour stressing the need for greater support for parents of children at risk. The Conservatives couple this with an emphasis on much stricter discipline in school, with head teachers given back the discretion to exclude unruly pupils. Labour would give them the right to search pupils for knives or drugs.

Whether voters will be looking forward not back, thinking what the Conservatives are thinking or seeking a real alternative, the overall thrust of criminal policy on offer from the main three parties is in the same direction. The demands of media driven politics have perhaps sat more comfortably

with the core values of Conservatives, with their emphasis on punishment and discipline, than with the Lib Dem concern for individual liberties or Labour's traditional interest in tackling the causes of crime. Yet all three parties nowadays offer a variant of tough on crime and tough on its causes, comprising punishment and rehabilitation, treatment and discipline, supervision and help. The balance of the ingredients may vary but the recipe is the same.

What is missing is a truly progressive agenda that enables disputes and conflicts to be resolved locally and equips mainstream health, education and social services to solve the often deep seated problems which lie beneath them. Esmée Fairbairn's Rethinking Crime and Punishment found a good deal of economic sense in and potential public support for such an approach. But at least in this election, it is only at the margins of the manifestos.

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