

Missed opportunities for preventing crime

Adam Crawford charts the highs and lows of the government's relationship with crime prevention.

Many commentators welcomed the key sections of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which established Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs), as representing a landmark shift in the way crime is governed in England and Wales. It appeared to represent a decisive shift towards an holistic preventive paradigm. Garland (2000: 1) described the unfolding 'preventive turn' as reflecting an 'epistemological break' with the past. Others proclaimed it as ushering in, and evidence of, a new era of 'networked governance' (Johnston and Shearing 2003).

In an earlier article in *CJM*, I summed up this optimistic mood: 'The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 begins a long overdue recognition that the levers and causes of crime lie far from the traditional reach of the criminal justice system... [the] new community safety partnerships, in particular, afford the potential to encourage a stronger and more participatory civil society and challenge many of the modernist assumptions about professional expertise, specialisation, state paternalism and monopoly. They also offer a fertile soil in which a more progressive criminal justice policy, which turns away from the 'punitive populism' of recent years, could begin to establish itself and flourish' (Crawford 1998: 4). Although in the article I went on to express scepticism, nearly 10 years on the optimism seems starkly misplaced. Furthermore, contemporary government initiatives, such as the Crime Strategy for 2008-11, have a strange feeling of *déjà vu*. The Strategy promises that 'partnership working will be strengthened' and 'government will be more enabling, and less directive' (Home Office 2007: 5). So why have the optimistic voices of high hope been so severely silenced? And what has happened to derail such aspirations?

One answer might be that the initial claims of a new direction were exaggerated. The dominance of state bureaucracies and persistence of penal sanctioning have been obdurate. After the wilderness years of the 1990s during which the Morgan Report (1991) findings had been conveniently shelved, it may be this misinterpretation was only to be expected. The leap of faith that a dramatic shift in resources towards prevention demanded never occurred. The enduring sway of 'punitive populism' and politicians' (and the media's) continued desire to talk up lawlessness, even against a background

of declining aggregate crime rates, did not provide a particularly productive environment in which to embed preventive thinking in the state sector, although it has continued to flourish in the business of private security and insurance.

The intervening years have shown that realising preventive partnerships has proved stubbornly illusive. The 'honeymoon' period of CDRPs was short-lived. Many partnerships were quickly stalled by a reluctance of some agencies to participate, the dominance of a policing agenda, an unwillingness to share information, conflicting interests, priorities and cultural assumptions on the part of some partners, a lack of inter-organisational trust, a desire to protect budgets and a lack of capacity and expertise. Despite s.115 of the 1998 Act giving partners the legal power to exchange information, in practice, partnerships experienced considerable problems in reaching agreements about what data they could legitimately share and on what basis. Along with data protection legislation, the implications of s.115 have been interpreted differently. Consequently, concerns over confidentiality have often stymied partnership working and 'problematised' inter-organisational relations. The involvement of the commercial sector has been patchy, often preferring 'to do their own thing' and the role of the voluntary sector has frequently been marginalised. Partnerships, dominated as they are by public sector bodies, have often found the commercial sector reluctant to do what they see as government's work.

Government responded to the perceived unwillingness of some agencies to engage with CDRPs simply by expanding the list of organisations under a legal duty to participate. Such has been the political disappointment with Community Safety Partnerships that, in late 2004, government announced a review of their activities, governance and accountability, acknowledging that: 'a significant number of partnerships struggle to maintain a full contribution from key agencies and even successful ones are not sufficiently visible, nor we think accountable, to the public as they should be' (Home Office 2004: 123). The review prompted two developments. First, government published a National Community Safety Plan. In it, government committed itself once again to deliver a more co-ordinated national approach, by requiring ministers to prioritise community safety policies and consider community safety dimensions of new and existing policies. However, the plan

created no new obligations and fell considerably short of either the s.17 duties on local authorities (in the 1998 Act) or the proposals put forward in the Morgan report for government to provide 'a community safety impact statement' for all new legislation and major policy initiatives. Secondly, government published a response to the review offering more of the same with regard to central steering of local partnerships, propped up by statutory duties (Home Office 2006). Impatience at the pace of change has provoked an acceleration of the review cycle with minimal regard for the burdens that partnerships are under to meet new initiatives and central targets. In practice, the focus of many partnerships has been compliance with national performance indicators, notwithstanding the requirement upon them to identify and pursue local priorities.

Under central pressures, the community safety remit of CDRPs narrowed significantly in the late 1990s to a focus on crime reduction as measured against police recorded crime figures. Despite the rhetoric of localism, government appears to have been unable and unwilling to adopt a more 'hands off' approach. In the politically sensitive arena of crime and disorder, desires to be seen to be responding to immediate problems often encourage a 'hands on' approach to micro-management, a notable example being the Street Crime Initiative. This initiative brought home to senior politicians – notably the then Prime Minister – the lack of joined-up working at the heart of government.

However, the government's own policy developments have often worked against cross-departmental and inter-organisational priorities by emphasising *intra*-organisational target-setting and narrow departmental goals. The myopic implications of performance measurement have afforded scant regard to the complex process of negotiating shared purposes, particularly where there is no hierarchy of control. This 'managerialist' policy climate has rendered it difficult to encourage partners for whom crime is genuinely a peripheral concern, to participate actively in community safety endeavours whilst they are being assessed for their performance in other fields. Perhaps government's newly stated intention to bring together key partners in a National Crime Reduction Board 'to drive delivery and provide shared ownership' is a partial recognition of how unhelpful its policy has been to local developments. Whether this will produce the desired effect is unclear, as is the extent to which the splitting of the Home Office and the creation of the new Ministry of Justice will enhance joined-up policies.

Another explanation for the relative lack of progress lies in a much deeper ambivalence about the appropriate tasks and capacities of contemporary government. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the emphasis on antisocial behaviour, which now sits alongside crime and disorder as a central preoccupation of all CDRPs. Together with the subsequent Respect programme, the intention now is to 'go broader, deeper and further' than before to 'ensure that the culture of respect extends to everyone - young and old alike' (Home Office 2006: 7). Paradoxically, at the moment in history when the 'myth' of the monopolistic sovereign state had become increasingly exposed, the British state appears to have embarked upon nothing less than the attempted transformation of contemporary manners. Since 2002, at least, imposing 'civility through coercion' and chasing the holy grail of 'public reassurance' have become the ambitious (and ambiguous) aims of much policy. More often than not, being seen to be 'doing something' before an anxious electorate has meant reasserting state authority, usually by

invoking *more law* and, frequently, more criminal law. The number and range of new powers created in recent years is testimony to the enduring recourse to sovereign command. The politics of crime prevention and community safety over the past decade have been caught up in this maelstrom of 'hyper-activity' in a context of 'hyper-politicisation'. The frantic quest for novel ways of regulating behaviour has been premised upon an incoherent conception of 'state craft' embedded in a clash between ambitious central state interventionism and limited capacities to effect change.

In some senses, anti-social behaviour has carved out a specific policy domain that CDRPs can call their own and against which they can be judged. Antisocial behaviour has given CDRPs new tasks to fulfil, services to manage and information to collect and collate. As an ill-defined and capacious policy field blurring traditional distinctions between crime and disorder, anti-social behaviour has given CDRPs a new lease of life. It has undoubtedly also given them a greater public profile and more direct channels of responsiveness to local concerns, for example through the 'community call for action'. Antisocial behaviour potentially allows CDRPs to return to their preventative origins. But to do so requires a major recasting of an agenda – especially at the level of central government – that sits awkwardly alongside other programmes, notably the commitments associated with *Every Child Matters*. In its focus on young people and families especially, antisocial behaviour is a warning of how early intervention, where prevention might have been the defining logic, has all too often been captured by an enforcement approach. Whilst many practitioners up and down the country work actively to resist this logic, the time is ripe for national leadership to rebalance the scales of administration away from enforcement-led solutions and towards a significant investment in prevention.

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