

# A 'new politics' of crime?

Ian Loader argues that Gordon Brown should adopt a fresh and more democratic approach to crime.

In a recent speech to the National Council of Voluntary Organizations (NCVO), the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, called for a 'new politics'. This, he declared, would be 'a politics that tackles the big challenges facing Britain today – crime and security among them – by engaging with people, drawing on a wide range of talents and expertise, debating issues, seeking long-term solutions not slogans and quick fixes – a politics, in short, of the common ground' (government website 2007).

The response of Britain's world-weary political hacks was predictable enough. Accustomed to viewing politics as an ideas-free space dominated by actors jockeying for electoral advantage, they largely poured cynical scorn on the idea. This was re-branding by a leader eager to break from the Blair administration in which he was a pivotal player; or the implausible u-turn of a tribal Labour politician and Whitehall 'control-freak'; or a move designed

activity that went on below the media radar screen (in local crime reduction partnerships, drug treatment programmes, or Sure Start), the headline message was firmly fixed on being 'tough' and being seen to be so – a notable symptom of which has been a government content to see the prison population escalate to untenable levels without any politically tenable strategy for bringing it under control. One can see why those working in the police and criminal justice system might treat Brown's promise of a new direction with weary disdain.

This though is too easy. It also risks squandering what might just be an opportunity to step off, or at least slow down, the 'law-and-order merry-go-round' (Wacquant forthcoming). Several signals sent by the Brown administration in its early days lend weight to this possibility: the measured response to the failed bombings in London and Glasgow Airport; the fact that Jack Straw, the new Justice Secretary, seems more preoccupied by constitutional

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simply to de-stabilise the opposition by seducing Conservatives and Liberal Democrats with offers of influence within the corridors of power. The 'new' politics, in other words, is but a tactical move in an 'old' political game.

Those working in the field of crime control – as practitioners or students – also have reasons for treating Brown's utterances with suspicion. They have become habituated since the early 1990s to crime and criminal justice being treated by government in a manner that has – in the main – been frenetic, headline-chasing and punishment-centred. Under Tony Blair, crime and anti-social behaviour was subject to a torrent of statements of intent, agendas, tsars, new institutions and initiatives, and a hyperactive frenzy of legislation. Professionals in the system came to be treated as remote, complacent, or woolly-minded – interest groups which had to bend to the will of central government targets. Despite the millions spent on programme evaluation, and the mantra that policy was to be evidence-based, penal policy remained predominantly determined by what 'public opinion' was deemed to want.

For all the quiet, effective crime prevention

reform and democratic renewal than with prisons and punishment; moving the 'Respect' agenda from the Home Office to a new Department for Children, Schools and Families; and the fact that the government has set itself to tackle – rather than act upon – public misperceptions of crime.

Whereas Tony Blair often conveyed the impression of having entered politics in order to tackle crime and punish offenders (placing him in the happy position of having personal morality and electoral calculation point in the same direction), one gets the contrary impression that Gordon Brown's passions and commitments lie elsewhere. Yet even if these sightings prove a false dawn, or are elbowed aside by a continuing political imperative to appear 'tough' on crime, there remain good reasons for taking Brown at his word and seeking to make good, rather than simply ridicule, his declaration of a 'new politics'. As Jon Elster once observed, hypocrisy can have civilizing effects (Elster, 1997).

How might this be done? First and foremost, it entails (encouraging) a break with two 'old' styles of politics. One of these – paternalism – Gordon Brown explicitly signalled a departure from, claiming that

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the challenges the country faces cannot be tackled 'simply by saying the man in Whitehall knows best'. This approach to governing has long since lost its political and cultural authority, not least in the crime field where it is no longer plausible to think that crime control policy can be left to civil servants and professionals to determine in isolation from 'public opinion'.

A second – consumerism – may be less easy to wriggle free of since it has shaped much New Labour thinking on how to respond to crime in recent years. The scale, substance and pace of the government's anti-crime programme has been animated by what is felt to be the need to elicit and often uncritically respond to the mass-mediated experiences and anger of 'the public' and to serve as consumer watchdog-in-chief taking on those with vested (and, it is said, liberal and out-of-touch) interests who run the system. Government has become a cipher of popular will; its task is to act, not to reason why.

A politics of crime that breaks with consumerism without lapsing back into paternalism must attend to both process and substance. The former requires getting right one explicit strand of Brown's 'new politics' – public deliberation. There is much that citizens' juries, standing commissions and other experiments in deliberative democracy can potentially offer by generating more informed public debate about, and intelligent responses to, crime and security problems. But realising this potential entails several things: it means seeking information from, and developing conversations among, all affected or interested groups – not just victims, or the active, or angry, or noisy; it requires awareness within government that one is trying to cultivate debate – which means pointing out inconvenient facts, putting contrary views and trying to build genuine common ground among citizens, not simply tapping into and running with the untutored sentiment and preferences of 'consumers'; it means involving criminal justice practitioners in that debate so that they become contributors to, not merely the recipients of, crime control policy; and it means being alive to the danger that encouraging deliberation about crime and what to do about it can, if great care is not taken, stoke social anxiety and raise expectations that are not easily quenched. Yet taking care to get this right can bring significant benefits – not least because engaging people in inclusive deliberation about how to provide security for citizens can – in and of itself – supply resources which contribute to that security (Loader & Walker, 2007).

In terms of substance, a new politics of crime requires government to break with its habit of talking endlessly *about* – and thus intentionally or otherwise talking *up* – the threat of crime. It means focusing on those offences, problems and neighbourhoods that are in genuine need of resources and attention whilst having the political courage to challenge lazy, populist, tabloid-fuelled mantras

about 'anarchic' Britain. It requires that government treat crime as *one* problem *for* government, not *the* problem *of* government, in ways that come to practical terms with the limited role that criminal justice and punishment can play in producing and maintaining secure societies, and quietly recognise the importance of wider processes of economic inclusion and social regulation.

Perhaps above all, it means cultivating a politics that takes and keeps on board what in the current climate seems a very hard lesson, but which is in fact little more than a (re)statement of the obvious: that what matters in a liberal democracy is not that we control crime but *how* we control crime – for the means we select to do so, and the temper we bring to the task, communicates a great deal about the kind of society that Britain is, or aspires to be.

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## References

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