

Justice and politics

Rebecca Roberts wonders what impact the new political terrain will have on justice policy and introduces this issue of *cjm*.

At the time of writing in early May 2010, a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has been announced and one can only speculate as to the shape of the new government and the impact on penal policy. While the issues of law and order, immigration and 'broken Britain' featured in party manifestos, they largely took a backseat to the economic problems we currently face. This is a somewhat distant cry from the mantra of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' that so skilfully symbolised New Labour ideology and helped seal their 1997 election victory.

Does the apparent party political disinterest in law and order issues represent a shift in the politicisation of crime and justice – and should it be welcomed? At one level limited attention to criminal justice has meant that some of the more salient issues have had greater airing with the economy, health and education top of the agenda. Whatever the eventual configuration, a radical shift in the politics and policy of justice and harm is unlikely. Rather than evidence of a move away from the law and order politics of recent years, the virtual silence on this area of policy throughout the campaign is demonstrative of the stifling political consensus. The criminal justice 'TINA' ('there is no alternative') that has shrouded UK politics and policy making has contributed heavily to the huge increases in criminal justice expenditure, documented in the series of briefings published this summer by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. As austere public spending begins to bite in the midst of an economic crisis, it will be interesting to see what impact this has on recent trends in penal expansion especially in light of ongoing private sector interest in the delivery of criminal justice 'services'.

Picking up on the theme of looking for alternative ways of addressing 'criminal justice' problems, **Toby Seddon** calls on drug policy specialists to look beyond the 'binary' debate of legalisation versus criminalisation. Drawing on historical texts, Seddon points out that the *status quo* has not always been so and highlights what he sees as the over-reliance on law and the state as means of delivering solutions to the drug 'problem'.

In the 'Debating... ' section, **Jonathan Shepherd** and **Ken Pease** make a controversial call for the introduction of medical standards in policing research. Responding to

their article, three respondents outline their concerns. **Robert Reiner** offers caution, highlighting the value laden and political nature of policing and research. Reiner is mindful of the limitations of medical standards of research in the context of ongoing concerns about partisanship and police abuses of power. **Peter Squires** is sceptical about the increasing narrowness of much policing and criminological research at the expense of what he sees as the important insights gained from interdisciplinary influenced work. **Louise Westmarland** is doubtful of the receptiveness of senior police officers to research findings. She concludes by arguing that 'in practice policing will muddle along as it has always done with or without a crime and justice research council'.

Other areas of interest covered in the 'Topical Issues and Comment' section include **Lynne Wrennall** on judicial misconduct and **Lucy Watkins** and **Peter Dunn** on attempts to work with women in prison in danger of domestic violence upon their release. **Phil Johnson** gives an account of how 'community service' has over time turned into community punishment, with an emphasis on public visibility and humiliation. At its inception, it the emphasis was on encouraging participants to engage in active community work, helping vulnerable people. The sanction now, he argues, focuses on a much more physical labour involving ground clearance and deep cleaning work.

In the themed section we explore the research and policy challenges relating to 'Transitions to Adulthood' published in line with recent work of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. **Richard Garside**, the editor of this section, sets the scene for this issue by exploring the social needs and vulnerabilities of young adults, highlighting the way in which social structures influence life chances and outcomes for many.

Criminal justice 'TINA' is now an embedded feature of British politics. What impact will the new political terrain have on research agendas, justice and penal structures? This is a question we hope to continue to explore within the pages of *cjm* over the coming months and we are actively seeking articles and commentary on these topics. ■

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