

# Cuts, state power and individualising responsibility

Arianna Silvestri introduces this issue of *cjm*

*December 2011 marks the end of the 80th anniversary of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, when we celebrated our history and reflected on current challenges via the prism of our experience. Our published studies this year have covered a range of topics, from the analysis of the impact of community sentences on imprisonment to the assessment of New Labour's time in power. As 2011 draws to a close, we find ourselves four years into the financial crisis and eighteen months into Coalition governing.*

Criminal justice policy, as any other field of governmental activity, is deeply influenced by the Coalition's commitment to cut public debt (irrespective of how that debt arose). That this is a profoundly ideological project, intent on shrinking state provision into an ephemeral 'Big Society' ragbag of provision has been widely commented on.

However, cuts in social spending, the residualisation of the welfare state and the demonisation of the 'undeserving poor' (see e.g. Osborne's description of benefits 'cheats' as 'muggers') were always likely to lead to increased social tensions and to increased demands on the criminal justice system.

The Coalition's opportunity and initial apparent willingness to reframe criminal justice in a less febrile way seems to have collapsed under the pressures of the Tory right, aided by some of Ken Clarke's gaffes and the wish to be seen as decisive over the August riots. All of which has opened the way for a return to 'hard on crime' rhetoric and to constantly broken record highs in the prison population in England and Wales.

Are new solutions being offered to manage this problematic field? Like in other areas of government, the Coalition's faith in the ability of the private sector to rescue and/or replace public sector services is in evidence: 're-offending' can supposedly be addressed most effectively through private investment in 'results'. This faith is not necessarily supported by evidence of effectiveness: it is 'black box' thinking, as the Ministry of Justice director of Offender Management told a 'rehabilitation revolution' conference in January this year.

**Ed Cape** and **Lee Bridges** guest edit the themed section of this issue of *cjm*, featuring a series of articles which assess Coalition criminal justice policies so far. The section looks at whether the government has been delivering on their promises to pull back state power and enhance civil liberties and public accountability. The verdict is far from glowing but the authors also call for true alternatives, for ways to curtail abuses of power and to achieve a decriminalising 'Big Society'.

Following this analytical and reflective approach, in early 2012 the Centre will be publishing the first year report of our *Justice Policy Review*, a four year project which will study and comment on key policy, legislative and social developments. The first report will cover the period from the election in May 2010 up to April 2011.

In the topical section of this edition of *cjm* **Tom Considine** looks at the 'responsibilisation agenda' espoused in Baroness Newlove's report on achieving 'safe' and 'active' communities. The report, he argues, fits well within the mainstream individualisation of responses to deviant behaviour. This suits the current austerity climate and squeeze on public resources by seeking to relocate responsibility to communities and individuals. It is also redolent of the discourses put forward in the mainstream media and by politicians with regards to the riots in English cities in August this year.

High profile criminal justice cases are covered in two other topical articles: **Kevin Haggerty** and **Ariane Ellerbrok's** and the Centre's **Roger Grimshaw**. Haggerty and Ellerbrok deal with 'serial killers' and Grimshaw with children found guilty of serious violence. Both pieces confront us with the simplifications and reductionism that as a society we conduct via media treatment and criminal justice interventions, which focus on individual responsibility. These perpetrators get vilified and their actions are over-simplified by a celebrity-driven media: in order to deepen our understanding of their behaviour we need to situate their violence within our specific historical and cultural context. We need also to understand the early social and familial experiences that profoundly affect personal development.

As well as children committing serious crimes, this edition of *cjm* looks at children at risk, whose rights are often ignored. **Rona Epstein** asks whether the courts take into account, as they should, the wellbeing of children when they sentence their mothers to custodial sentences.

**Lorraine Hope** and **Bridget Waller** argue that the current structure of jury discussions does not facilitate equality of contributions and propose a simple modification to aid more participatory deliberations and decision making.

In the debating section **Naomi Phillips**, **Philip Whitehead**, **Nic Groombridge** and **Claire Bonham** consider whether there is a place for faith in the criminal justice system, with particular reference to those serving custodial sentences. ■

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