

# editorial

## prisons today

We all suffer from selective amnesia. But it is important to keep reminding ourselves that during the 1980s the average daily population in prisons remained relatively stable at around 45,000, while the numbers of people sent to prison actually fell during the second half of the decade. It is, in fact, only since 1993, when Michael Howard set a course for its rapid expansion, that the prison population in this country really began to rise, increasing by some 40 per cent between 1993 and 1997. The question which now confronts penal reformers, and which is reflected throughout the pages of this special edition on imprisonment in England and Wales, is whether the recent growth in the use of imprisonment signals the beginning of a movement towards the American strategy of 'mass incarceration', or whether the scale of imprisonment will return over the next few years to pre-Howard levels.

As **Seán McConville** points out in the introductory article, British penal policy has been deeply influenced in the past by American developments, despite the fact that the problems of crime and disorder in this country are quite different from those obtaining in the United States. Michael Howard, more than most of his predecessors, embraced American penal policy, and this appears to be moving steadily towards the hard end of the correctional scale. The change of government earlier this year and the appointment of a new Home Secretary encouraged some to think that there might be a change of direction. However, on the evidence to date, the likelihood of a decline in the prison population in the near future looks remote, notwithstanding proposals for early release for those deemed suitable for tagging. Despite Jack Straw's pleas to judges prior to the election to use community based alternatives to custody wherever possible and his public statements regarding the phasing out of privately run prisons, the prison population continues to grow and new contracts are to be issued to private firms to run prisons.

Since the new government came to power, the prison population has increased from just over 60,000 in May 1997 to almost 64,000 by the end of the year. The official prediction is that the number of people in prison will be in the region of 70,000 by the Spring of 1999. These figures are, however, conservative. At the present rate of expansion the prison population could be nudging towards 80,000 by the end of the century. As **Rob Allen** asserts in his review of recent developments, overcrowding is imposing intolerable strain on the service, at every level. **Stephen Shaw** finds it hard to think of "a single prison which is not in a worse state today than it was on the day of the General Election".

The reversal of the Government's position on prison privatisation, we are told, was essentially pragmatic. But one of the messages from **Keith Bottomley** and **Adrian James'**

article is that private prisons are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Given this, they call for continuing vigilance in monitoring the comparative costs and quality of service across the whole prison estate. It remains the case that policy on prisons and punishment is primarily managerialist in focus: rarely are questions of justice and fairness raised.

We also, in this edition, feature interviews with the Minister for Prisons and Probation, **Joyce Quin**, and the **Chief Inspector of Prisons**. The two thematic reports this year, from the Inspectorate, on *Women in Prison* and on *Young Prisoners*, contain much food for thought. **Sir David Ramsbotham** proposes the removal of all under 18s from prison, except for those who are involved in either long sentences or sexual offences. Alongside these proposals, however, as **Paul Cavadino** notes, the Government has in fact postponed ending the practice of holding remanded 15 and 16 year olds in Prison Service custody and at the same time endorsed the use of secure units for juveniles. By contrast, the young inmates of Aylesbury Young Offender Institution, interviewed by **David Kidd-Hewitt** for this issue, have a few ideas of their own about crime and punishment.

There has been a 76 per cent increase in the number of women prisoners over the last four years. This is almost twice the rate of increase for male prisoners. Sir David Ramsbotham's report published in July this year said that the prison system had failed to recognise the special needs of the 2,650 women prisoners. He added that he believed that only one in three women prisoners posed a danger to the public and needed to be behind bars. **Barbara Hudson** and **Chris Tchaikovsky** would agree with many of the points contained in this report but the latter would go even further in recommending the abolition of imprisonment for most women.

Alongside these issues there are ongoing problems of health care and drug use in prison. The 'discovery' of extensive drug use in prison in the late 1980s has prompted the introduction of mandatory drug testing as well as various treatment programmes which are designed to help drug users. The question has also arisen of whether those who need treatment for drug abuse are best dealt with in prison - but as **Paddy Costall** argues there is in any event a need for substantial investment in treatment.

Finally, as **Andrew Coyle** points out, the operation of prisons in this country is increasingly subject to international agreements which set out minimum standards and guidelines for the treatment of prisoners. The inclusion of the European Convention on Human Rights within our own legal system may open the way to penal reforms and the improvement of conditions and may also help to overcome the apparent contradiction between talk of reductionism on one hand, and the reality of continued prison expansion and deteriorating conditions on the other. It may also shift attention increasingly away from the current preoccupation with management and security and towards questions of justice and fairness.

*Roger Matthews, Julia Braggins and Tim Newburn*