

**I**t is without doubt that the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) is the flagship legislation by which the Labour Party, stands to be evaluated with respect to tackling the issue of crime. As is well known, this piece of legislation is broad in its coverage, potentially wide in its impact, and highlights trends which have become taken for granted in the context of managing the crime problem. These trends, the multi-agency approach, the use of crime audits, the focus on the young offender, the concern with

community safety to name several have, over the last twenty years, become embedded in the academic, political, and policy talk about crime. Since their election New Labour have also been required to respond to the recommendations of the Macpherson Report (1999) the result of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Those recommendations have led the Home Secretary down the road of introducing quotas for the recruitment of police officers from ethnic minority groups. Taken together these events have meant that the last two and a half years have been a very busy time indeed for New Labour in the criminal justice arena. Two questions remain however; what, if anything, is 'new' about 'New Labour' in this context? And what are the consequences of this activity likely to be?

what is presumed by the concepts of partnership and community safety as they are put into practice? Who is included and who is excluded by them?

### **An absence of voices from below**

A brief excursion through the publicly available crime audits and strategies, and a glance at those who people such partnerships, provides part of the answer to these questions. These answers are suggestive of other continuing trends; that is an absence of voices of those from below. Which also means, more often than not, an absence of an understanding that different communities may function very effectively with very different conceptions of what constitutes community safety for them (see Walklate and Evans, 1999). Understanding the nature of these absences is important if for no other reason than that these absent voices are also the voices of those who have suffered disproportionately as the gap between rich and poor has grown and they are also the most likely to suffer the problem of crime and the impact of criminal victimisation.

### **Issues for effective community-based crime prevention**

More often than not, these are also the voices that have been increasingly demonised as being part of the underclass. In a socially just society, it is essential that these voices should be heard. For example, listening to and understanding local community dynamics may well offer useful insights into the management of the young offenders in that locality. Such a process could offer an understanding of the notion of reparation (a theme within the Crime and Disorder Act) which would render it not only meaningful but also effective at a local level. The Audit Commission's own report, *Safety In Numbers* (1999) suggests that this kind of localised input is not happening. This appears to be to the detriment of the effective working of the criminal justice system: youth projects seen to be run by outsiders who do not understand the needs of local

## **Reflections on 'New Labour' or 'Back to the Future'?**

**Sandra Walklate asks whether Labour's flagship crime and disorder legislation will help those whose lives are most damaged by crime.**

### **Presumptions within the concepts of 'partnership' and 'community safety'**

In some respects the Crime and Disorder Act constitutes the culmination of a number of processes which were already present in criminal justice thinking and practice. For example, the statutory requirement placed on local authorities to produce crime audits along with their plans for crime reduction working with other agencies in their locality formalises partnership practices that some areas already had in place. This requirement centres the notions of partnership as the mechanism for addressing local crime problems, and community safety as the conceptual framework in which such partnerships need to be formed.

On the surface, both of these notions make sense. Politicians, policy makers and academics of both left and right persuasions have accepted the viability of them as working and workable ideas for some time. It is, however, at the level of acceptance of these ideas that a key problem lies for the outcomes likely to be associated with their continued implementation. A number of questions best elucidate this problem: Whose community?; whose sense of safety?; and in what localities? In other words,



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people, for example, may meet with resistance. This does not augur well for the huge amount of money and effort being put into Youth Offending Teams and the range of projects being funded and evaluated under the sponsorship of the Youth Justice Board to tackle youth offending. A fact which is probably of no great surprise to practitioners with a sense of history.

## The aftermath of Macpherson

The police are central to many of the developments discussed above: from providing data for crime audits to sitting on partnership committees, to engaging in different practices for the warning of young offenders. Indeed many of these initiatives would not work at all without the police. So alongside the impact of the Macpherson Report which many Chief Constables have taken on board, the last two and a half years have also been a busy time in this arena. The Macpherson Report in particular has perpetuated the concern with the service delivery of policing both internally to the police as an organisation and externally to the public. This has raised many of the same issues as were raised in the Scarman Report (1982). As a result some of us have re-visited the difficult issue of the race and crime debate.

I say some of us because, in some respects, this is the issue of debate which has largely been absent from the coverage of, and arguments around, what may or may not be achieved in relation to policing as a consequence of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. It is clear that the introduction of quotas is unlikely to resolve any of the questions which this inquiry raised, arguably because it has missed the mark in understanding policing on the one hand and the complex interplay between ethnicity, class and crime on the other. It is no accident that the absence of this debate is one which parallels those absences alluded to in the earlier observations made of the Crime and Disorder Act.

The interplay between social class, ethnicity, sex, crime and community culture which renders some crimes problematic for some people and others not, cannot

perhaps be captured by legislation; but it can certainly be captured within the processes of legislative implementation if people want it to be so. There's the rub.

## Managing crime - but who benefits?

This discussion has so far assumed that the interplay between politics, policy and research is to put in place practices that will make a

difference to, that is to say improve, conditions for people. Indeed we have learned a good deal over the last thirty years about the nature of crime, criminal victimisation and more effective ways of managing these issues. Yet little of this knowledge appears to inform current policy or politics in relation to the examples highlighted here. I may, of course, have begun this commentary from the wrong starting point. As John

Pitts (1999: 20) observes:

"The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) is New Labour's flagship and epitomises the New Labour project. Aimed at 'Worcester Woman' rather than 'Clapham Claimant' or 'Jarrow Job Seeker', the Act promises the Conservative voters who defected to Labour in 1997 that it will contain the posed threat to their property, person, peace of mind by the 'neighbours from hell', and their perfidious progeny, the pre-pubescent predators from purgatory, who haunt the streets of the inner city and the estates on its periphery."

'Thinking the unthinkable' then, it seems, means thinking that Labour will not get re-elected. It does not apparently mean that we endeavour to put policies into place, whether that be with respect to policing, young people or community safety which carry with them a chance of working for those who suffer most from crime and criminal victimisation as opposed to those who think that they do.

**"My hope is that the next decade will see a reversal of the trend towards harsher punishment and more imprisonment which has characterised most of the 1990s and that we can move to a criminal justice system which emphasises restoration, rehabilitation and the prevention of reoffending."**

*Helen Edwards, Chief Executive, NACRO*

**"The most significant development over the last decade was the creation of the 'Prison Works' policy which led to a 60% increase in the prison population. Over the next decade there will be a significant increase in indeterminate sentences."**

*David Roddan, General Secretary, Prison Governors Association*

**"At the start of the last decade prison privatization looked set to be one of the most controversial and politically divisive penal issues of the century. In the event, contrary to most expectations and confounding both hopes and fears, the design, construction and management of prisons by the private sector has now become a 'taken-for-granted' part of the penal system in England and Wales - for good or ill!"**

*Professor A. Keith Bottomley, President, British Society of Criminology*

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