

The Cure for Crime

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ROBBERIES are now being reckoned in fractions and multiples of a million pounds. Jewellery, bullion, banknotes. What used to be considered at best a necessity of the poor, an achievement of the sub-normal, a disgrace of youth, a symptom of the mentally diseased, has become a business proposition. Crime is now an economic investment for those who fancy big returns with some small risk: exciting to plan, thrilling to commit, sordid but sensational when found out, richly respected when not.

But prisons, too, have improved their status. The shameful reformatories are developing into cosy dormitories where 'heroes' may idle away the few years between crime and enjoying the proceeds. Prison is now less a place of horror and more an economic factor in criminal reckoning—a sentence is the 'period of risk' between 'investment' and 'maturity.' If a crime is big enough it is worth the fifty-fifty chance of a few years 'away.' A thief may well be sentenced to seven years' preventive detention for stealing less than a pound's worth of goods, if he is a persistent offender. Another may well receive a shorter sentence for being in-

volved in the robbery of a quarter of a million, if he is a first offender.

Being apprehended eventually is not so important. What is important is to have the loot big enough, to hold it long enough to get it stored safely away for future use. Prison-lounging is a well-paid occupation in these circumstances, and the prison system is constantly improving in order to make everyone's stay pleasanter.

Comforts increase, cooking improves, social workers abound; interviews are numerous, research ubiquitous, rules relax. Officers get more friendly and prisoners more respected every day. Working hours are short—30 hours a week is considered a high average—work pace is leisurely; work is invented more often than productive, is never economic. By comparison, an honest living looks harder all the time.

Despite complaints, overcrowding in cells and inadequate sanitation are due more to the increasing number of those volunteering for a life of crime than to the prison authorities, who are spending millions of pounds a year on improvements. New prisons are going

up speedily—designed not, as some think, to make a life of crime more attractive still, but in the hope that reformatory influences lacking in the prison system may be discovered in the architecture.

Unfortunately, the hope is unfounded. Ample plumbing and well-designed brickwork, likeable clothing and good food only nurture the shell of the spirit: they are decencies that should, and could, be the common tribute to every human life, in and out of prison. Like kindness and courtesy, they are basic human rights, not moral panaceas. Those who believe that they are have not yet used them enough. With great zeal and goodwill the prison authorities are providing for prisoners all the essentials of civilised living except the prime essential: the ability to make a living.

Much of the prison population has no objection to this. Regular work is not an ambition of dedicated criminals. The suggestion that they should make an honest living at least while they were in prison would outrage their sense of propriety. First offenders and petty criminals, however, are generally energetic and wish to be useful. Sentences of full employment would be welcomed by them not only as a present pastime for energies, but as a security for their future chances at the Labour Exchange. Persistent offenders and major offenders generally suffer from persistent and major idleness. Sentences for them as full of work

as if they belonged to the unimprisoned working class might eventually persuade them that they might as well stay out and become one of the unimprisoned working class. As it is, prison does more than encourage the idle; prison requires the energetic to discipline themselves to idleness.

By the time release comes most prisoners have lost any habit of regular smart-pace work, have lost the confidence of skills they may once have possessed, are depressed by being out of touch, being older, being an unknown quantity even to themselves; are embittered by long subjection to pro-crime propaganda. Yet in some fuddled, fantastic, unmoral way society pretends to believe that shutting an offender up idling at a cost of £12 per week should result in the repentance and reformation of the offender into a work-loving, honest-living wage earner. More fantastic still, this idling is supposed not only to absolve but make amends for any offence: the longer the idling, the bigger the offence. And strangest of all, it is supposed to satisfy the victim that the crime committed against him is fully compensated: that justice has been done, despite the fact that it is the victim who is left working to support the offender—working to regain, perhaps, what was lost to him through the offence.

It is true that compensation is being considered for victims of crimes of violence—one of the more difficult groups of crimes to

assess in terms of cash. But compensation for the victims of the more easily assessable crimes, like larceny and blackmail, is long overdue. Not one in 50 victims of larceny has his possessions returned to him intact.

Yet compensation is farcical if it is going to emerge as a hand-out financed by further charges on the taxpayer: if it is to be largesse filched from those who are already prison loungers at £12 per head per week. The morality of such an arrangement would not merely be farcical, it would be corrupt.

To be of any benefit to anybody, crime must pay for itself. To cut crime down to its proper size every crime should be valued in cash, to be repaid in full by the offender's work in prison. To benefit prisoners, with a sense of proportion, hope and self-respect, prisons must be turned into rich assets of energy for the nation, from institutes of parasitism.

What I have called the self-terminate sentence would, if permitted, provide the framework for this reform, and ensure full co-operation from the most work-shy malingerer. Few prisoners would find it worthwhile to sabotage a reform that settles the length of his or her sentence in each prisoner's own hands.

The idea is that the self-terminate sentence should be served by courts on offenders in terms of money, not time. Offences against property would be valued primarily on their material damage: the thief

of £100 would be sentenced to provide £100 from his labours; and additionally, at the court's discretion, fines would be levied on each offender's intent, persistence, danger or nuisance value, these additional fines to be paid from prison earnings or from private moneys, at the court's discretion. Stolen property voluntarily restored might also, as the court directed, be deducted from the total compensation ordered, for by this means much stolen property could be recovered.

The lure of crime as an investment would lose its glitter. Salting away stolen fortunes for enjoyment after sentence loses its appeal when the sentence means working till the fortune is restored.

The system would aid the police not only in recovering stolen property, but also in making arrests. The habit of taking the rap for others would be quite abandoned if taking the rap meant working for others. Any who shared in crime would quickly be named by their apprehended colleagues so that they should share in the pay-off as well. In some cases the compensation required would be so colossal that no threat of revenge, no promise of reward after sentence, would make it worth while to keep the apprehended mouth shut. The underworld would be marvelously scoured.

All damages ordered would not necessarily be awarded to the crimes' victims. The court would

apportion the amount to be paid to victims; the remainder, if any, to be paid into a General Compensation Fund, of which there would be a need in order to pay compensation for offenders mentally or physically too ill to work, or too old.

The self-determinate sentence would end capital punishment. 'A life for a life' becomes a judgment of much more vital and deterrent interest to killers and would-be killers than the present, deadly, wastrel, irredeemable practice of hanging, when 'a life for a life' means that a murderer shall use most of his life to support the dependants of his victim. If the victim of murder or manslaughter had no dependants, the compensation ordered would be directed to the General Compensation Fund.

Indelicate, perhaps, to assess a killing in terms of money. More indelicate the present sordid system of either hanging the killer uselessly out of the way, or assessing the killing by the number of years the killer shall rot uselessly in prison before atonement shall be presumed complete.

Before any compensation was deducted from earnings, all offenders would, of course, pay for board, lodgings and clothing while in prison. A sum of £3 a week would cover this simple fare. The salaries of prison staff and the costs of building new prisons, the two major items of prison expenditure, would be financed from the public purse as public services.

Compulsory savings to a minimum of £10 would be deducted from prisoners' earnings for their use on discharge. At present the few shillings of charity given to help prisoners on their way through the prison gates are more calculated to aggravate temptation than to secure well being.

National Insurance and income tax, where applicable, would range in the £6 to £10 scale, which in practice would mean that from £2 to £5 would be available for repayment of compensation from each prisoner each week: the smaller sum from the less-skilled and beginners, the larger sum from the more practised and able. With this in mind, the courts would, as they do now, impose their fines with consideration for the limitations as well as the propensities of the offender.

Old age pensioners would pay their keep from their pensions and have additional income from work if they were both willing and capable. Fortunately, the crimes of old age pensioners are usually small and would take very little compensation in terms of earnings. Drunkenness and vagrancy are their chief offences, and prison is often their favourite haven.

For those too old to work who commit serious offences, and for those too ill to work, the General Compensation Fund would make compensation. In so far as old age and chronic illness are now accepted as valid causes for mitigated sentences, so they would continue to

be at the court's discretion. Should a prisoner's health seriously deteriorate in prison, the court order of compensation or term of imprisonment could, of course, be brought under review by the Home Secretary, as at present. Such leniency would be small invitation to malingerers. Senility and the more malignant diseases are hard to fake, and not worth the agony of trying.

With the ability to work his way out of the main gate, even the laziest inmate would feel the desirability of making an effort. All prisons would be turned into residential factories where, as in outside factories, there would be scope for the employment of the talents of machine-minders, clerks, cleaners, typists, cooks, canteen staff, maintenance workers, labourers, packers—scope for most ages and abilities. In addition to factories, residential outside working parties working on roads, forestry and land reclamation would be formed. The position of instructor in each section would be held by prison staff.

It will be said that the unions will object to prisoners undertaking commercial work of any nature, and being paid full union rate for it. Such objections are, however, based on the fear that for every prisoner with a job there would be an honest worker without one. It is a surprisingly old-fashioned, stale outlook. Unions with the future of the working population visioned in their hearts should be insisting on

the full use of manpower in prison on the grounds that for every prisoner working there is a better chance of a shorter working week and longer holidays for every other worker—this without detriment to national production, or the cost of production—this with the chance that some better use may be found for the taxpayers' money than paying lawbreakers' lodgings. It is another example of our strange morality that only the wealthy and the lawbreaker are deemed worthy to idle life away with no responsibilities. The working backbone of the country must make do with a pension after 40 years of effort, and a fortnight's holiday per annum until then.

Over the years the prison authorities have become increasingly keen and equipped to teach trades to suitable candidates. In 1961 about one in 16 prisoners received trade training, and 50 per cent. of these passed examinations at preliminary or advanced levels. This is highly commendable, but is hardly comprehensive. Unsuitable candidates are the difficult problem: the deserving problem. Finding work for the talents of one suitable candidate in 16 is not as important as finding work for the 15 unsuitable candidates in 16.

Trades for prisoners is an ideal, but one not nearly as important as work for prisoners. Learning guild skills is not nearly as practical a proposition as learning the regular habit of labour. What is often

wanted is work that can be learned in a few hours: productive work, the skills of which can be passed on without any noticeable gap in production; so that from the beginning of the sentence, however long or short, each prisoner is gainfully employed. Such jobs are often repetitive and dull; they are also essential, commercial and remunerative, are endured means of making an honest living.

Trade schemes in conjunction with a productive working week could well be arranged. The wages of full-time apprenticeship would not be adequate nor attractive to people trying to earn their way out of prison, but voluntary evening and week-end training schemes would be welcomed by the earnest.

Many other activities which now riddle much-appreciated holes in prisoners' working hours would be relegated to evenings and weekends. Visitors and research workers,

psychologists, social workers and even chaplains, magistrates and governors would be required to interview when the most important business of the day, the most unprisoner-like hours of the day—the hours of the normality of making a living and paying off debts—were over.

The greatest blessing that can befriend a prisoner is that prison will enable him to pay for his offence. Not in some metaphysical, soul-searching way achieved by bars, years and kindly chats alone: but in a practical, material, real expunging that all can see; by a self-achieved balance that leaves no cocky or bitter chip on the shoulder about debt to society. That leaves the prisoner on discharge as free, honest and paid-up as most of us, and as capable of doing a day's work: and as welcome at a place of work because of that.

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