

editorial

crime, values and beliefs

Rob Allen and Clare Sparks put this issue into perspective.

In his recent Edith Kahn memorial lecture on civic renewal, David Blunkett said that people put their faith in the criminal justice system to uphold the rule of law and our shared values. When it comes to dealing with crime and offenders, how shared are those values? The articles in this issue are in the main concerned with the beliefs and values people hold about measures to tackle offending and in particular the role which prison should play.

Stuart Dew describes tensions in the Christian tradition between an Old Testament emphasis on punishment for sin and a more rehabilitative and restorative slant in the teachings of Jesus. Arguably the denomination that has had the greatest impact on penal policy is the Quakers. It was they who created the penitentiary as well as restorative justice. Mike Nellis reviews the positions taken by the Society of Friends through the years, pointing out divisions between those who reject punishment completely and those who take a more pragmatic line. Chaplains from different faiths at Leeds prison describe an impressive multi-faith initiative based on common values about the dignity of human life; the responsibility of the strong for the weak; a desire for peace

and a willingness to empower individuals to take responsibility for their lives. Of course how to turn such seemingly uncontroversial values into action is the stuff of political discourse and conflict. Roger Grimshaw's research measuring the current level of faith-based activity in prisons prepares the ground for a second phase of research which will show how such positive activity can be strengthened. Rob Allen looks at public opinion and the positions different political parties have recently

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taken on criminal justice, while Simon Hughes MP puts forward the Liberal Democrat perspective.

The tougher position adopted by mainstream parties in the last ten years or so reflects the fact that as Martin Kettle puts it, criminality which for much of the 20th century was seen as a function of society as a whole, is now again located more firmly with the individual. He analyses the 'What Works' approach in prisons in terms of the philosophical positions of pragmatism, individualism and rationalism. 'What Works' is given practical

effect in prison and the community by the growing number of programmes based on the findings of rigorous research and evaluation. Kettle argues that 'What Works' has been unfairly caricatured as overly narrow and that the watchwords are now context, responsiveness and diversity. The Leeds chaplains certainly believe that relationships are as crucial a part of ensuring crime reduction and public safety as formal risk assessment and reduction. For Helen Drewery, circles of support and accountability for released sex offenders, originating in Canada and now being piloted in the UK, are a practical example of relationships addressing crime in some of the most difficult cases.

Relationships lie at the

heart of Stephen Pryor's vision of a responsible sentence, in which courts and prisons work together to ensure that convicted offenders do what they can to repair the social fabric. Such a vision is poles apart from the views of crime, criminals and justice enshrined in the popular TV series 24. The absolute priority given to speedy and efficient control of crime, the acceptance of torture as a means of extracting information from suspects, and a dominant role for punishment may only be present in a fictional programme. Yet David Wilson sees this as perilously

close to reality in the USA at any rate.

In the UK too, the growing prison population suggests that imprisonment is increasingly seen as an acceptable or even desirable response to crime. This is despite its well known limitations. For a serving prisoner who writes in this issue, there is no better place to learn about crime and become more aggressive. And for Ann Hagell, who looks at how children learn right from wrong, if young people are treated badly most will treat others badly. Overcrowded prisons, where young offenders have no purposeful activities and are not treated as if they matter, are a hotbed for incubation of more offending on release.

The Youth Justice Board has been driving a different approach. Norman Warner describes a pragmatic and preventive philosophy underpinning the changes which have seen reoffending fall significantly. For him, it is the job of adults to reinforce the importance of core values and to demonstrate the consequences of a stance outside of those values, not to throw up our hands in despair or to react hysterically by calling for ever more punitive criminal justice responses. ■