

New wine in old bottles – charting the progress of Labour’s crime prevention policy

Daniel Gilling argues that there are even stronger reasons now for implementing the recommendations of the 1991 Morgan Report.

When New Labour entered office in 1997 it wasn’t clear in which precise direction crime prevention policy would be travelling. Under the Conservatives crime prevention had risen from a position of relative obscurity to somewhere near centre stage as governments sought to contain a crime problem that threatened to spiral out of control. Yet alongside such pragmatism, the Conservatives also backed solutions that fitted their political and ideological world view. This meant, in particular, a strong preference for situational crime prevention; a relative neglect of the social causes of crime and measures required to address them; and a reluctance to add to the powers or resources of a local government sector that was viewed with suspicion, both for its profligacy and its vulnerability to capture by the ‘loony left’. Such political and ideological constraints undoubtedly held back the local development of crime prevention.

inclined towards them, although the ambiguity of Tony Blair’s commitment to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, and his preparedness to support the tough-talking punitive measures introduced by the Conservatives in the twilight years of their administration, left some room for doubt. So how have events transpired post-1997?

In the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 New Labour appeared to make good its commitment to implement Morgan’s recommendations, with the establishment of local statutory Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) and the institution of a problem-oriented process based upon a three-yearly cycle of audits, community consultation and strategies, that promised to make a reality of the rhetorical commitment to ‘local solutions for local problems’. Yet with no additional core funding, limited local expertise and a very tight deadline of 1 April 1999 for the production of the first strategy,

The Home Office has continued to emphasise a more narrow focus on crime reduction. But it is more than a war of words, as government policy has made it hard for CDRPs to pursue a more expansive vision of community safety.

The Morgan Committee was established by the Home Office to inquire into the slow development of the partnership approach to crime prevention. The Morgan Report (Home Office, 1991) suggested, amongst other things, that progress would be assisted by embracing a broader approach to crime prevention, such as community safety, which combined the situational with the social – an approach practiced by several urban local authorities operating both in the UK and further afield. It also suggested that community safety should be co-ordinated through statutory rather than voluntary partnerships, and that such partnerships should have ring-fenced budgets and local democratic involvement.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two key principles to which Morgan referred, namely holism (as opposed to a narrow focus on situationalism), and local democracy (through the local authorities), were unpalatable to the Conservatives, and the report’s recommendations were duly shelved. In opposition, however, New Labour appeared more favourably

many CDRPs lacked the capacity to do much more than engage in minimal compliance, producing strategies that were more aspirational than grounded, and that often involved the re-packaging of existing activities (Phillips et al., 2000).

Central funding has since materialised, first with the themed, competitive Crime Reduction Programme, and latterly with a succession of funding streams, the most recent of which is the Stronger and Safer Communities Fund (SSCF). However, such funding has been tied closely to the attainment of the Home Office’s Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets, and this has gone some way towards undermining the local nature of CDRPs, which have been put in the uncomfortable position of consulting locally, but then having to respond to a forcefully expressed national agenda. Some CDRPs, for example, came under strong pressure to drop everything and focus their energies on street crime as part of the nationally-led Street Crime Initiative, even though some did not regard street crime as

being a significant local problem. Meanwhile, the Home Office's unfortunate habit of releasing details of funding streams only *after* CDRPs have drawn up their three-year strategies has similarly eroded the local emphasis.

If Morgan's focus on local activity has been undermined, the same could be said about holism. Many English CDRPs have preferred to market themselves as *community safety* partnerships, whilst the Home Office has continued to emphasise a more narrow focus on crime reduction. But it is more than a war of words, as government policy has made it hard for CDRPs to pursue a more expansive vision of community safety.

Under pressure to meet crime reduction targets over relatively short time scales, CDRPs have tended to be pushed down a mainly police-dominated crime control path dominated by CCTV, high-visibility patrolling, and enforcement, targeting prolific offenders and anti-social behaviour hotspots.

Contrary to Morgan's suggestion, for example, the responsibility for youth crime prevention, was given not to CDRPs but to Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), whose statutory 'offender management' role has made it hard for them to find time to fulfil their preventive brief. And while New Labour may recognise the social causes of crime, any measures taken to combat those social causes have tended to bypass CDRPs, operating instead through mainstream programmes and area-based initiatives over which CDRPs have had little influence. These social measures, embedded within the broad agendas of neighbourhood renewal and, more recently, civil renewal, also represent a vision of the social as *moral* space, requiring the exercise of individual responsibility and moral authority, rather than as space occupied by structural disadvantage and inequality.

Consequently, in so far as a social approach has been brought back in by New Labour, it has often bypassed CDRPs, which have fallen back on measures that are less about addressing social inequalities, and much more about enforcing morality, for example through 'workfare', and various tools of contractual governance (Crawford, 2003), such as 'parenting contracts' and 'acceptable behaviour contracts'. Under pressure to meet crime reduction targets over relatively short time scales, CDRPs have tended to be pushed down a mainly police-dominated crime control path dominated by CCTV, high-visibility patrolling, and enforcement, targeting prolific offenders and anti-social behaviour hotspots. This approach represents a failure of joined-up government, and a failure to instil a truly holistic approach to the problem of crime (see Gilling, forthcoming).

It would be wrong to come to a wholly negative conclusion about the development of local crime prevention under New Labour. Just as some localities pursued more expansive visions of community safety in the 1990s, in the face of a more situationally-oriented Conservative administration, so there is space for local resistance to the current Home Office's narrow emphasis upon crime and disorder reduction. There are, however, limited resources to do this. And although the Home Office's vision may be narrow, it competes for the terrain of local crime prevention with other government departments such as the Department for Communities and Local Government, whose vision through its predecessor,

the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, was more community safety-friendly, and incorporated more of the 'new localism' to which Gordon Brown claims to subscribe.

Recent policy changes, such as those contained in the Police and Justice Act 2006, that embed the business of CDRPs more firmly within Local Strategic Partnerships and their Local Area Agreements, suggest that the principles of localism and holism are not yet dead and buried.

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References

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