

# Engaging with honest politicians

Rod Morgan calls on criminologists to engage more effectively with the political and policy making process.

Becoming a Whitehall insider, as during 2001–2007 I was at HM Inspectorate of Probation and subsequently the Youth Justice Board, is a fascinating and salutary experience, not just because one's priorities, responsibilities, and assumptions change—which of course to a substantial extent they must do—but because one sees the academic fraternity in a new light. Some sympathies are enhanced. I was incensed, for example, by the incomprehension and arrogance regarding the research process which some administrators displayed. They showed little appreciation of the time it takes to put a research bid together, yet often sat for months on a draft report before providing feedback. Yet it worked the other way round as well. Many research reports never see the light of day, not because they reveal politically unpalatable findings, but because they are sub-standard: they *should* never be published. Further, many social scientists are awful communicators both orally and in writing, incapable of summarising key findings for practitioners or policy makers briefly and in words their audiences can understand. If one is organising a major conference for a probation, prisons, or youth justice practitioner audience, the number of safe, communicating pairs of academic hands one might invite is not large: a comatose rather than an angry audience is the biggest risk. My principal concern, however, was the lack of effort most academic criminologists seemed to make trying to influence public debate and policy formation. So often during the period 2001–2007, I thought to myself: Where are the accessible newspaper or journal articles, or the

radio or tv interviews, by authoritative criminologists which are exposing the key issues here? Are they all talking to each other in darkened rooms? Or is it that they don't know what is going on?

It has of course not been a conducive climate in which to engage with the policy and political world. For various reasons, the huge expansion in government funding for criminological research after New Labour first came to power generated a miserable outcome in terms of added knowledge (for discussions of the *Crime Reduction Programme*, see Hough et al., 2004; Maguire, 2004; Morgan and Hough, 2007:55–65). This spawned on the one hand a research-hostile or sceptical Whitehall climate with senior ministers who, frankly, did not much want to know about research. Despite the mantra about pursuing evidence-based policy, some of the politically highest-profile policy areas, such as anti-social behaviour, involved initiatives where there was little or no evidence base and no serious attempt to collect data, even to the point of not honouring government obligations to monitor ethnic impact. Mere publicity that the government was doing something (introducing new police or local

authority powers, whipping up support for their use, publishing statistics as to their use, etc.) sufficed.

At the other extreme was the over-the-top, inappropriate application of the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods expressed through Treasury demands for 'hard data' before monies were allocated or the dismissive consignment of research not coming up to that methodological standard to what Mike Hough and I have described as the 'bonfire of incompetence' (ibid. 59). This inconsistent, twin-track approach to policy making was extraordinary, and one hopes that a cool head will eventually write a history of it. One outcome has been

the emergence of research/management consultancies undertaking work which in former times would have been done in house by government departments or contracted out to university-based researchers or data collectors.

It has of course been fiendishly

difficult, as I know all too well having now been out of the loop for just over a year, keeping track of what exactly is going on in Whitehall. The sheer pace of legislative change since 1997—anything between 50 and 70 criminal justice-related statutes and the creation of 3,000–4,000 new offences depending on whose estimate one relies on—and the relentless reorganisations (including creation of new government departments), and reorganisational turns (has there ever been a policy fiasco as breathtakingly wasteful and debilitating as the NOMS saga?), have made it almost a full-time job keeping abreast of developments. When I started teaching criminology and criminal justice policy in the early 1970s, it was possible, with a

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major criminal justice statute or Royal Commission report and its aftermath every 5 or 10 years or so, to chronicle for students key policy developments since the Second World War. God knows what course tutors do today. It would not be surprising if many teachers consigned much of the legislative/institutional stuff to the bonfire of Whitehall vanities, focusing instead on the data sets of who is doing what to whom on the ground.

The damaging consequence of all the above is, I think, the biggest gulf between the Whitehall policy makers and the academic research community that I have known during my career, though, interestingly, new alliances have been forged in critical adversity. University seminars are now more likely, for example, to include judiciary and senior police participants. Generally, however, academic criminology wears a bruised and battered face, with many representatives taking the view that engagement with practical policy making is either beyond or beneath them.

All of which leads me to plead that fresh efforts be made to re-open the dialogue between senior policy makers and the academic research community. There has developed a destructive lack of trust and comprehension between the two. Many politicians feel that academics, generally speaking, are insufficiently in touch with the public concerns which are brought to bear on them, directly through their constituency surgeries or the mass media. And many academics seem to make the assumption that most politicians cynically take populist initiatives for the sake of short-term electoral advantage, knowing that they will have no long-term benefit in terms of reduced offending. The civil servants seek to straddle the divide between these beliefs which have undoubtedly firm historical foundations but which nonetheless tell only part of the story. There are good criminologists out there steeped in knowledge of the toughest neighbourhoods in the land, and there are ministers who want to achieve more than a sound-bite or a winning quip at question time in the House of Commons.

The dialogue needs to take different forms. It is time to revive some old formulae.

On the Whitehall side, there is a case for re-introducing research open days and the electronic equivalent, regularly updated and easily accessible, of the old Home Office published *Digest* of information and statistics. Further, when is a senior civil servant going to emerge who has the self-confidence and courage, and ideally the backing of ministers, to do what David Faulkner did as Deputy Under-Secretary for criminal justice policy in the 1980s? Namely, institute a trust-building discussion group, of which I was a fortunate member, comprising 'insiders' and 'outsiders', which, as David Windlesham has put it 'provided a sounding board, enabling civil servants to keep abreast of the state of reformist opinion, and for the penal reform groups and academic researchers to obtain an insight into current thinking at the Home Office' (Windlesham, 1993:8, n 13).

As far as the academy is concerned, there is a serious need for the contemporary equivalent to Morris and Hawkins' (1970) *Honest Politician's Guide to Crime Control*, a policy manifesto ideally generated by an authoritative, high level, team of criminologists (Robert Reiner's otherwise excellent recent book of almost the same title (2007) does not do what it says on the tin).

The circumstances which prompted Morris and Hawkins' 1960s text are not dissimilar to our own time. Then, in the US, as now in the UK, there was widespread public fear of crime, and more and more behaviour and persons were being criminalised. The response to these concerns was, at one extreme, a view which Morris and Hawkins described as 'ingenious utopianism'—the proposition that there needed to be multi-million dollar programmes designed to eradicate much social inequity—and at the other extreme 'cynical dystopianism', the view that nothing much could be done to change the parameters giving rise to criminal behaviour not least because in the words of Daniel Moynihan, who should have known better, 'Nobody

knows a damned thing about crime'. Morris and Hawkins argued that, on the contrary, quite a lot was known about crime and that criminologists, if heeded, were capable of setting out an agenda which could avoid the excesses of both the incidence of crime and criminalisation.

2008 is not 1969, and the UK is not the USA. But there would be much to be gained, not least for our politicians, in having a vigorously confident and coherent criminological academy effectively communicating the core policy messages to which an abundance of evidence, much more evidence than was available when Morris and Hawkins were writing, points. Volume crime is falling. Yet we are criminalising more behaviour and incarcerating more people with the cost consequences spiralling out of control. There is a policy making crisis in Whitehall. It is not helped by many criminologists—there are notable exceptions—standing, jeering or publicly silent, on the sidelines. ■

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