

End of an error

Rebecca Roberts introduces this issue of *cjm*

At the time of writing, the expectation is that a general election will take place in the spring of 2010 and that there will be a significant shift in the balance of power within parliament. While the sense of fin de siècle is not quite as strong as experienced in spring 1997, there is no doubt that a change in management and tone is approaching and such a time provides an opportunity for reflection about the past and contemplation of what the future might hold for research, policy making and practice.

The themed section of this issue of *cjm*, guest edited by **Will McMahon** of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, offers a series of articles reflecting on New Labour's approach to criminal justice. He wonders what a penal reformer who has recently awoken from a coma that began in 1997 might make of today's criminal justice system? An air of disappointment – and at times, indictment – weaves its way through many of the articles. The expansion of criminal justice in lieu of the expected and social reforms to bring about greater social justice would have disappointed the reformer.

Ian Loader and **Richard Sparks** consider opportunities for political engagement in the post election period. They introduce a series of letters to government authored by academics who were invited to reflect on priorities for a new government, what mistakes they should seek to avoid and suggestions for future research and policy priorities. **Benjamin Gould** suggests a retrenchment of CCTV and surveillance, while **Gordon Hughes** argues for a reduced use of custody and a reversal of the ongoing 'criminalisation' of social policy; Hughes also identifies a 'rift between criminological research and government thinking on crime and justice'. **Fergus McNeill** claims that it is punishment, rather than crime, which has spiralled out of control and warns that criminal justice has been a spectacularly bad investment. Meanwhile, **Coretta Phillips** calls upon government to alleviate racialised disadvantage and discrimination in criminal justice. **Toby Seddon**, quoting Lenin, asks 'what is to be done?', appealing for a more radical approach to dealing with the problems of alcohol and other drugs. He says we must 'look beyond the law', 'look beyond the state' and have 'an integrated approach' to drug classifications.

Regular readers of *cjm* will notice that in this issue we have expanded the topical articles section of the magazine and offer fewer articles in the themed section. The rationale for this is to encourage a greater variety of more contemporary articles which, we hope, will encourage a new and more diverse range of writers to contribute on the themes of criminal justice, social policy, and social harm.

So the topical section contains articles ranging from **Esther Efemini** recounting the stories of survivors of forced marriages to **Maurice Punch**'s discussion of police corruption, where he argues that the simplistic legalistic notion relating to bribery needs expanding and that corruption should be considered a collective rather than individual issue, relating to institutional and systemic problems.

Other articles include **Dina Gojkovic** exploring recent research on prison spending and service delivery to people in prison experiencing mental health problems; **Stijn Verhagen** and **Alfons Ravelli** look at restorative practices in schools and **Ian Marsh** and **Gaynor Melville** explore the ways in which certain communities are criminalised through negative representations and media reporting. **Paddy Rawlinson** and **Pete Fussey** describe the brutal realities for migrants in East London. **Helen Mills** writes about the contradictions and tensions for organisations working with young black people in a funding climate that prioritises 'crime reduction' and short-term programmes.

Since 1997, New Labour neither exceeded nor, indeed, even met the expectations of those who invested hope in the 'social justice' messages that had been promised. Were New Labour swept along and knocked off course by circumstances beyond their control, or authors of their own demise? What role have we played – academics, policy makers, practitioners, campaigners – in directing policy and practice in a progressive direction? How have we supported reforms that have either supported or eroded the influence of criminal justice in our society? And what balance should we strike in future between challenging the status quo, encouraging policy to move in progressive directions and offering radical alternatives and ways out of the punitive rut in which we now find ourselves?

As the drama of the election campaign unfolds and the results are announced, we wait to see how the political landscape has changed and the subsequent impact on policy, research, and practice. When we began planning for this *cjm*, the themed section was entitled 'End of an error?' with a question mark. In light of the articles it seemed that there was little doubt that an 'error' had occurred, so we took away the question mark. Perhaps the key question is whether 2010 marks the end of such an 'error'. Another 13 years from now, will there be a positive story to tell? ■

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