

How corrupt is Britain?

David Whyte and Arianna Silvestri introduce this issue of cjm

We are in the midst of a sustained moment of exposure for the British state. In the past two years, we have been fed a daily media diet of stories of 'corruption' scandals: reports of major newspapers getting involved in phone tapping and pay offs to police officers, the seemingly endless examples of the falsification of police statements in some of our highest profile cases, all of the largest British companies using hidden offshore locations to avoid tax, personal protection insurance mis-selling, horsemeat sold as 'beef' by most of our high street supermarkets, arms companies bribing foreign governments, drug companies illegally paying other drug companies to keep accessible medicines off the market, politicians being paid to ask questions and fixing expenses claims and so on and on.

In so far as the stories in the headlines merely confirm what most of us already knew, it is no longer possible for the business and political class to sustain their cherished myth of Britain as a society that is relatively free from corruption. In order to discuss the significance of this moment of exposure, and to discuss ways to challenge the corruption of power, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and the University of Liverpool co-organised a conference in Liverpool in May this year. This issue of **cjm** presents a selection of papers written by contributors to the conference.

At the conference, titled *How Corrupt is Britain?*, speakers addressed a much more deeply embedded notion of corruption than that normally developed in criminology texts; one in which the relationship between systems of political representation, criminal justice and private profit are interconnected and mutually reinforce the power of political, institutional and corporate elites. Corruption appears to be so routine in British public life now, that even finding a definition which draws a clear line between criminality and normal business practice is almost impossible. The routine or pervasive nature of corruption in public institutions and in business now questions whether the term 'corruption' – which indicates a *deviation* from the normal way of organising public life – is still a useful concept. This is the issue that **David Beetham's** article tackles head on. In it, he argues that we can retain a precise definition of corruption that does not discard the concept entirely.

Recent general elections in the UK have been contested in the midst of major parliamentary corruption scandals. Labour's election victory in 1997 took place following a major 'cash for questions' scandal. The profligate expenses fraud that engorged members all of the major political parties provided the backdrop to the 2010 general election. **Stuart Wilks-Heeg's** contribution moves beyond those individualised cases of fraud and

corruption to show how corporate funding is embedded in the party system. Although recent reforms have made some aspects of 'corruption' in this process more visible, they have done nothing to dilute the ability of vested interests, such as venture capital or hedge funds, from buying influence in the political system.

The trail of revelations emerging from police forces in the past few months have included allegations of the falsification of evidence at Hillsborough, withholding of evidence in the Stephen Lawrence case, the falsification of police evidence surrounding the death in custody of Sean Rigg, corruption in the Metropolitan Police's Sapphire Command, and – this would be the stuff of satire if it wasn't so serious – even in the Met's own anti-corruption squad. Deception and fabrication of evidence has also been shown to be routine practice in the systematic cover-up of state killings, including police shootings, police deaths in custody, assassinations resulting from collusion between the security forces and paramilitaries in the North of Ireland, and the deaths of peaceful protestors. **Joanna Gilmore** and **Waqas Tufail's** commentary draws upon a range of cases of police corruption to show how the key institution that is supposed to guarantee police accountability, the IPCC, has since its inception failed in its task. They argue for a renewal of police monitoring groups, such as the newly established Northern Police Monitoring Project. **David Whyte** shows how police corruption was crucial in supporting the illegal blacklist of construction workers, a corporate crime that has been described as one of the worst cases of organised human rights abuse in the UK.

It is now commonplace to hear promises – at the highest level – that the criminal law will be used against bankers that use the system for personal gain. In June 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron promised 'penalising, including criminal penalties against bankers who behave irresponsibly'. Yet such empty promises obscure some key questions about the responsibility of government: why have successive governments not only failed to control the financial sector, but actively encouraged speculative banking, collusive accounting standards, and tolerated regular and systemic consumer rip offs by high street financial institutions? This institutionalised tolerance of routine criminality has enabled the 'banksters' to operate fraud and legalised ponzi schemes on an unprecedented scale. Contributions here by **Steve Tombs** and **Prem Sikka** show how those processes are governed not by a mysterious set of forces that we cannot understand, but by principles of collusion



and cronyism that are easily recognisable and can be controlled.

In the topical section, **Kevin Albertson, Chris Fox** and **Kevin Wong** focus on 'justice reinvestment', an approach which does not much feature on the current policy radar. Its potential to address issues of both criminal and social justice is being overlooked, the authors argue. **Heather Powell** considers the harm caused by the intersection of business and government interests in the ways anti-biotic resistance as a health threat is dealt with (or not), at both national and global levels.

Emma Murray's study opens up a discussion about how army veterans are perceived and treated in the criminal justice system. **Marian Duggan** and **Vicky Heap** compare and contrast anti-social behaviour and hate crime policies in the context of political discourses meant to recognise and empower victims. **Tony Murphy** directs our attention to the potential for research malpractice in the social sciences, in the constant pressure to publish which characterises academic life.

In the In Focus section **Malcolm Torry** argues that the benefit system in the UK is fundamentally unjust and

incentivises behaviour which is then labelled as criminal. He puts forward the idea of a 'Citizen's Income' as an alternative to means testing, an unconditional right which would redress the fundamental problems inherent in the current welfare payment arrangements.

At the time of producing this **cjm** we were profoundly saddened to learn about the untimely death of Barbara Hudson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Central Lancashire. Barbara influenced and inspired a great many critical criminologists over the past three decades, and has been a close personal friend to many. She will be very much missed by those of us who knew her and worked with her. ■

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CENTRE FOR CRIME AND JUSTICE STUDIES

How Violent is Britain?

Friday 16 May 2014, 9.30am – 5pm

University of Liverpool

The list of speakers and how to book your place will be announced in January:

www.crimeandjustice.org.uk

and

www.liv.ac.uk/law-and-social-justice