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In a recent opinion poll, the voters of Basildon generally considered to be one the key lightning rods of British politics - put law and order alongside health care, education, and unemployment as one of the four major issues which will determine where they will put their cross on future ballot papers. This is not likely to surprise anyone, for law and order is now a prime party political battleground. Whilst, once, the post of Home Secretary was considered to be the most important of non-jobs, we are now used to there being at least one new Criminal Justice Bill every year, of debate about crime being characterised by large amounts of heat (though often relatively little light), and to Home Affairs being the main arena in which politicians can prove how tough they are (though currently, Europe may be a close rival). Anyone who remembers the elections of 1964 and 1966 might possibly be forgiven for thinking fondly of the days when law and order was not considered to be decisive vote-winner.

Those days are gone forever and, though temperatures are already running high, with a General Election imminent, party political manoeuvring over crime and criminal justice is set to gather further pace. We have, therefore, devoted this issue of CJM to looking at the current politics of law and order. The contributors come at this from various angles: some looking at how we come to find ourselves where we are now, others looking to the future. Setting the tone for much that follows, David Downes, looking backwards in order to look forwards, begins on a realistically pessimistic note. Focusing on the continuing increase of social inequalities and the progressive entrenchment of possessive individualism, he argues that without radical changes in social policy - rather than criminal justice policy - we face a future not just of rising crime, but crime of increasing seriousness.

How do our politicians view the future? We invited the three Home Affairs spokesmen of the main political parties to contribute a piece of their own choosing. No direction was given as to content. Our only guidance on our approach was to say to each that we were not seeking to stimulate direct party political debate, merely to offer them space to discuss issues which they consider to be of contemporary importance. Perhaps not surprisingly, their focus is primarily on the criminal justice system. The range of reforms to the system advanced by these three spokespeople is broad indeed. Between them they propose a number of radical changes to the sentencing system and to the release of prisoners from custody, statutory crime prevention duties for local authorities, the introduction of a community safety order, radical reform of the youth justice system, improved community supervision and rationalised custodial facilities for young offenders, an overhaul of the CPS, and action on weapons. Later in the issue there is an in-depth look at one of the major pieces of legislation currently before parliament: The Crime (Sentences) Bill.

In this issue of CJM we have also commissioned articles on the future of the probation, police and prison services, on homelessness and on youth justice. However, the authors of several of these articles eschew the opportunity for suggesting radical change and, instead, make a plea for the more modest aim of reducing public expectations of criminal justice. They enjoin the politicians and policy-makers to avoid the temptations of apparently simple solutions such as 'prison works' and, rather, to think carefully about leading and educating public opinion. These politicians, however, are not only engaged in a battle with each other but, argues by the Crime Correspondent of *The Independent*, they are hamstrung by our popular media whose hunger for policy-by-soundbite is seemingly insatiable. The drift towards punishment often feels impossible to resist. So used are we in England and Wales to change and yet more change of an increasingly punitive character, that it is easy to think that it will always be thus. Indeed, recent experience in Northern Ireland lends some support for such feelings. However, as the article on the 'peculiarities of the Scots' shows, it is not only the case that they have a different system of criminal justice, but that the policies and politics of criminal justice are distinctive north of the border. This is perhaps the best possible case that can be made for removing our somewhat parochial criminal justice blinkers.

Tim Newburn, Peter Francis & Julia Braggins

editorial