

The Government's negative response to the recommendations of the Audit Commission's report, *Misspent Youth, Young People and Crime* is as predictable as it is cynical. However, any serious attempt to implement them in the wake of the 1997 general election will have far-reaching effects upon both the administration and the operation of the Police, the Probation Service and Youth Justice in England and Wales.

Losing the fight against crime

In 1979 a newly-elected Conservative government promised to increase both the power and the size of the police force and toughen sentencing. For the police this was supposed to lead to higher rates of prosecution and conviction. In a similar spirit, the Government vowed to bring the practice of youth justice into line with 'common sense', replacing a

vague and weary welfarism by a strengthened juvenile court with a renewed appetite for just deserts. The inner-city riots of 1981 and the miners' strike of 1984 ensured that the police remained "Margaret Thatcher's favourite service", while youth justice professionals, and to a lesser extent probation officers, continued to be regarded with deep suspicion by the political right. However, by the mid-1980s the government of good housekeeping and low taxation was under mounting political pressure to square its highly expensive, and apparently unsuccessful, commitment to the 'fight against crime' with burgeoning public expenditure. As a result, an implicit commitment to 'the restoration of the rule of law' at any price was hurriedly transformed into a demand for a justice system which represented value for money.

A new penology

This was to be achieved by the extension of central government over criminal justice agencies and the imposition of a new, actuarial technology geared to the cost-effective processing and disposal of offenders on the basis of administratively determined priorities. This was an approach 'driven' by the logic of the accountant rather than the police officer or the social worker. While this apparent *volte face* was greeted with hostility by the rank and file of the police, most youth justice professionals were both surprised and pleased that they were now required to play a far more central role in the system than ever before. By the late 1980s in England and Wales, under pressure from central government, the police, the probation service and youth justice sections were involved in low-cost inter-agency partnerships which aimed to produce a tightly managed, cost-effective youth justice system. To their credit, many of the professionals involved in these developments used them creatively to develop imaginative police cautioning schemes and alternatives to custody.

In the 1990s, Chief Officers of Police were increasingly employed on short-term,

Taking young people seriously

Alan Marlow and John Pitts argue for a fresh response to youth crime prevention.



performance-related contracts. Not surprisingly, those with ambition were likely to be more responsive to the new, short-term governmental 'crime-busting' imperatives than local problems of crime and disorder or long-term preventive strategies aimed at ameliorating them (Marlow 1995). While central government deployed the rhetoric of local crime prevention unstintingly, in reality expenditure never exceeded 2% of the overall crime control budget. In their attempt to rationalise costs, the police turned increasingly to collaboration with other agencies with which they might share the policing task. For their part, youth justice professionals and probation officers were required to concentrate their efforts upon diverting high-tariff 'offenders' from care or custody and low-tariff offenders from prosecution. Professional intervention, beyond tightly-targeted, time-limited 'offending programmes' was negligible. This enabled local authorities to reduce their residential and youth justice services in order to meet the spending targets and national standards imposed upon them and the probation service by central government.

However, this 'new penology' began to unravel very rapidly in the early 1990s.

Back to basics

The cumulative effects of youth riots on out-of-town housing estates in 1991 and 1992, 'twocking' and 'ram raiding', 'rat boys' and, eventually, the tragic death of two-year-old James Bulger at the hands of two truanting ten year olds sent the Government scurrying for a new, electorally plausible, youth justice policy. What emerged from their hasty deliberations were the Secure Training Centres, a great deal of public speculation about 'bootcamps' and a bungled attempt to expunge the last remnants of social work ideology from the probation service.

A new realism

But now change is in the air. New National Standards for youth justice promulgated by the *Association of Directors of Social Services* stress that a

young person in trouble is also a 'child in need'. Citing the 1989 *Children Act* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, they argue that only if adequate levels of universal and specialist provision are made available to socially disadvantaged young offenders and their families, can the system be said to be just. The recent *Morgan Report* on crime prevention and community safety recommended that responsibility for crime prevention be placed with local authorities. Apparently New Labour wants this too. Starting from a concern with the costs of youth crime and youth justice, the Audit Commission arrives at very similar conclusions. Thus it appears that in the second half of 1997 we may well see a new initiative to intervene with high risk families and low-scoring schools in high crime neighbourhoods which aims to prevent, rather than simply manage, youth crime.

A redistribution of crime

Yet these families, like the schools their children attend, are located in those impoverished neighbourhoods which have been overwhelmed by the global social and economic changes which transformed most advanced industrial societies in the 1980s. These changes have occasioned unprecedented population shifts which have undermined relationships of kinship and friendship in the poorest neighbourhoods, eroded spontaneous sources of social control and located those most vulnerable to criminal victimisation alongside those most likely to victimise them.

These social pressures have also undermined parents' capacity to protect their children from involvement in crime. As a result, the past decade and a half has witnessed both an unprecedented increase in the volume of crime and its redistribution towards Britain's poorest citizens (Hope 1994).

Yet these developments are not inevitable. In France during the same period, recorded crime dropped, falling fastest in the poorest neighbourhoods. This was achieved by a sustained attempt to open up educational



and vocational opportunity and political participation. This required central government to devolve political power and financial control to neighbourhood level, and to the professionals who served those neighbourhoods, in an effort to elaborate relevant and imaginative local solutions to local problems. (King 1989, Pitts 1995). This was made possible by strong political leadership and co-ordination by town mayors and the articulation of their efforts with the relevant government departments via the office of the Prime Minister.

The redistribution of control

Youth riots on the Blackbird Leys estate in Oxford, inter-racial gang fighting in East London and shop-lifting in Hartlepool are plainly not of a piece. They have different origins, different meanings and different social and personal consequences. As such, they are not amenable to responses prescribed by central government. An effective response would take account of local differences in patterns of youth crime and victimisation, their history and their relationship to contemporary social, economic and

demographic developments. This would require central government to place far greater trust in public servants and far greater faith in the capacity of socially disadvantaged people to resume control of their neighbourhoods and their own lives.

References

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