

Digging for the truth

Keith Bottomley talks to David Kidd-Hewitt as he prepares to take up his role as president of the British Society of Criminology.



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How did you become a criminologist?

I think like a lot of things that happen, it was very largely by accident. I happened to be an undergraduate at Cambridge in the early 1960's. I was doing Classics, which clearly seems to be miles away from criminology.

The early 60's was a time of great debate about capital punishment and as a side interest I became involved in a student society which was campaigning for its abolition. As it happened the first Institute of Criminology was also at Cambridge, so I ended up getting to know, in my leisure time really, some of the well-known criminologists of the day.

So when it came to my third

year, and I was perhaps destined to be something like a classical archaeologist or a Greek historian, I suddenly thought what about criminology? Is there any way I could become a more serious student? After a lecture, by Terence Morris as it happens, I went along to see John Martin at the Cambridge Institute and he said, 'Oh yes, we have lots of Arts graduates coming on our course', so I decided to go for it and go for the Postgraduate Diploma Course at the Institute of Criminology.

Before I started the course, I was invited to take part in what we now call a participant observation study at Dover Borstal, so I spent 3 months with a colleague in Dover Borstal and that really got me hooked on wanting to know more about crime, criminals and prisons.

Tell me a little more about this participant observation study that got you 'hooked' as you say.

For this country it was unique. It had come about by collaboration between Derek McClintock at the Institute and the then Governor of Dover Borstal who attended a special senior course at Cambridge. It was the Governor who said 'look, I'm interested in changing things at Dover Borstal. What about the Institute doing a project examining what we are doing?' Derek McClintock felt there should be two students who could spend time in the Borstal living alongside the Borstal lads as they were called, and the staff. We did the usual diaries of what happened. Those were very formative experiences for me.

What was the nature of criminology as taught to you at that time?

The Diploma Course itself was very wide-ranging. We had all the experts, not just academics but judges. It was very multi-national, the students on the course were from all over the world.

It was a very optimistic time. It was felt, both on the theory side and on the policy side, that criminologists could really make a difference. They could make a difference in terms of coming up with explanations of why people commit crime and they could make a difference in terms of policy on prisons, or the treatment of

offenders. The optimism that characterised the 60's was very attractive to young students of criminology. You'd be doing something that fascinated you and you could see a way in which it might potentially alter things quite significantly.

Is that optimism something specific to that point in time? Is there optimism in your teaching here at Hull?

In my inaugural lecture ten years ago, I tried to reflect on changes in criminology over the previous twenty, twenty-five years. I talked about the 60's as a time of optimism - a sort of youthful optimism. I then described the 1970's, the next decade, which is when I started teaching students at Hull, as a sort of growing up in terms of the real world. Change didn't always occur in the way you were hoping it would. It wasn't exactly disillusionment, but it was the period of coming up against reality. There was certainly a change in the 70's in the optimism about the treatment of offenders. More or less internationally, there was a recognition that not a lot seemed to work in terms of reducing crime and certainly not in the individual treatment of offenders.

So, professionally, and also to some extent politically, it was a time of re-thinking. Theoretically, we'd had the very intense period from '68 to '73 let's say, of the new criminology, the deviancy conference. There was a period after 1973, with the publication of *The New Criminology*, when all courses, all academic criminologists, had to take account of this major watershed in radical theory.

For those of us who had been, for whatever reason, more involved in the practical criminal justice side, there was a feeling that, again, things would not always work as we hoped they might. We had to come to terms with that, just like the theoreticians had to come to terms with how they incorporated or took on board the radical theorising as opposed to the older positivism.

You've succinctly characterised criminology as you see it in the 60's and 70's. Take me into the following decades. How do you see them?

I think that in the 1980's, for criminologists who were interested in trying to put their ideas into practice - to change the system - things changed very significantly. For example in the various ways in which the academic community were consulted: the Advisory Council on the Penal System was abolished by the Conservative Government, and it felt as if, in the 80's, irrespective almost of what policies the Conservatives brought in, criminologists were being sidelined, or marginalised or rejected. So, that was, and continued to be, almost up to 1997, quite dispiriting. Very much like a mid-life crisis.

Professionally there was a sort of mid-life crisis for some of us within academic criminal justice studies. You wondered why you were there. Most of the policies that were introduced by the Conservatives in the 80's and early 90's seemed to have no regard whatsoever for evidence-based research. They were very much driven by ideology, by their concern in the latter years to go along with public opinion in terms of their perceptions of crimes and the policies about crime prevention and offenders. You felt that there was a risk, on the applied side, of criminology being put on the scrap heap.

Do you have an example of this 'side-lining' affecting your own research work?

One of the more recent research projects for a team of us from Hull was a commission to evaluate The Wolds, the first private prison quite near to Hull. When we were commissioned to do this by the Home Office, the Conservatives were opening Wolds Prison and said this would be an experiment to see how the privatisation of prison worked. 'We'll wait to see the outcome of the evaluation before we decide on whether it should be extended'.

Almost within months of our project starting, and certainly within a year of The Wolds being opened, the Government decided, irrespective of any sort of evaluation, either political or professional, to go ahead with the programme of contracting out prisons. So what was the point of this research?

As it happened, it then

developed into something arguably more interesting. We were asked then to evaluate Wolds Prison compared to some new public sector prisons. So the research did develop a value of its own but the point was that this was very different from the original intention and I think this was typical. A concern for research was often overtaken by political events. So unless you could salvage some other value out of it - certainly I think we did and I hope the outside world did with the Wolds project - you could feel totally disillusioned about this relationship between research and policy change.

You have researched and published in many key areas and your work is highly regarded. Is there a particular piece of research that made you feel, "This is it - this is what criminology is all about. I feel particularly proud of this?"

That's a bit like writing your own obituary. You mean what gave me particular satisfaction? There are small things; for instance, very early on when I was a PhD student in the late 60's, I ended up, again almost by accident, choosing a topic (it wasn't my first choice) looking at the operation of the bail system about which, at that time, there was very little legislative control. It seemed rather boring, and a rather more legalistic than sociological topic, but I ended up doing this and it involved studying court decisions in East Anglia and the West Riding of Yorkshire (which is where I come from).

But, by accident, it was a topic that, in the 3 years that I was doing a PhD, suddenly came onto the political agenda. And this meant that I was invited as a PhD student, very new to criminology, to give evidence to a Home Office Working Party that was looking at the arrangements, the legislation for bail in magistrates' courts, on the strength that I was one of just a few people doing research into bail. Being invited to give oral evidence and having a dialogue with an official committee which, in a small way, in their recommendations, took account of what I had said to them - which wasn't even in the shape of an examined PhD yet - that gave me a sense that, 'well, you can have an influence.'

What are your current committee memberships and positions?

I've been a long term member of several national organisations. I'm obviously in the ISTD. I was one of the first supporters of the Prison Reform Trust. I've been in the Howard League since I was a student. I've been the former editor and joint editor of the Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, and now, of course, I'm involved in the British Society of Criminology.

Locally, I'm involved in the Humber Police Research Group which is going to expand its terms of reference this month to be a Criminal Justice Research Group, and this, like a lot of the things that I do, brings together members from the two universities in the region, and the senior members of the criminal justice agencies for collaborative research at all levels. I'm also the Chair of an organisation called The Humber Criminal Justice Forum - again this is a similar organisation in its objectives. Each month we take a particular issue - last night we looked at the crime and disorder audits, one has just been completed in Hull City - and we set up opportunities for academics, practitioners and members of the public to come together and hopefully learn something. This is very much now, of course, a theme of the Labour Government's policies, particularly the Crime and Disorder Act which puts statutory responsibilities on local authorities to develop strategies, particularly in the youth justice field to set up multi-agency teams. On very few of these, interestingly, are there statutory roles for criminologists.

Tell me more about your new role in the British Society of Criminology?

The British Society of Criminology has changed pretty dramatically, certainly in my professional lifetime. Let's say for twenty years of that, as far as I was concerned, the British Society of Criminology was a small group of academics and practitioners and policy makers who met for early evening meetings in London. When I was in Cambridge, it was relatively easy to go to London for those meetings, but all the time I've been in Hull, where I've been

for thirty years, it has become almost a practical irrelevance because it was clearly impossible unless you were down in London to go to the meetings.

That changed about ten years ago, shortly after the first British Criminology Conference where the academic community raised questions about the future of the British Criminology Conference and its possible relationship with the British Society of Criminology. Under a number of subsequent presidents (I think Roger Hood was the first) The British Society of Criminology has transformed itself.

It has had two, or possibly three, constitutional re-organisations in the last three years, its membership has far more than doubled in the last ten years, branches, for the first time, have been set up more or less throughout the UK which have their own programme of activities. Now we have got the launch pad. We've got a large membership, the majority are academic criminologists and the other members are practitioners with a strong commitment to similar values and objectives in terms of interest in research. We have the launch pad for taking forward a programme of activities and priorities which in the last few years we've been trying to build, increase the membership, the coverage and set up the infra-structure. I become President elect in January 1999 and take over from Philip Bean in July at the Liverpool British Criminology Conference 1999.

What kind of mission statement do you see for the Society as their new President?

I haven't yet developed a formal mission statement. No doubt I'll be expected to do this in due course. However, some of the priorities I think I see are fairly mundane. I think you would start by establishing the British Society of Criminology as the main professional association to which most academic criminologists, hopefully, would see the value of belonging. In that role we would take further the development of a professional code of ethics which would cover the conduct of research, relationships with research subjects and research funders. So it would develop the sort of things that professional associations normally do.

I would also hope to get far more official recognition for the Society than it has at the moment from the Home Office, as in some way representing the professional community. I would hope to enhance its profile within the Home Office as an organisation that ought to be consulted and likewise with the ESRC and the HEFC. Another important element, which is both about how the Society works and also about criminology, is the relationship with the media. The media, particularly in these last few years, have such a powerful influence on society's perception of crime. I think, somehow, we have to develop the relationships between the British Society of Criminology and the media so that we can get criminologists to become involved in a constructive debate about the crime situation. For various reasons, we as criminologists haven't felt able or encouraged really to get involved. We've left the media debate to the media, or to the politicians, or to just one or two very brave criminologists who have been prepared to put their ideas on the line. I would hope, through establishing the British Society of Criminology as a key professional association, actually to encourage members to have this debate with the media and thereby hopefully influence public opinion about crime and get its research, get its theories, into more of the everyday discourse about crime.

I'm impressed. But wouldn't you be put in a position, particularly with your statistical knowledge, of saying to the media, 'well in fact the horrific crime rate that you are blazing across your front pages, is much higher because you are only quoting published statistics which are notoriously under-counting.' So you could actually contribute towards a greater moral panic by getting involved in the way that you have described.

Yes, there is always this risk. There was this risk inherent in the decision of the Conservatives to sponsor the first British Crime Survey. That was a very bold decision, I think, for which they are to be congratulated. I'm certain that, on balance, the decision to go ahead with the British Crime Survey which is now possibly the most well respected crime survey in the world, has paid

dividends ultimately for public knowledge about crime. For instance, in the very latest findings there is evidence that the 'real' crime rate, possibly for the first time, is in many key areas on the decline. It was a gamble that's perhaps taken nearly twenty years to pay off.

We shouldn't avoid trying to dig around for a truer version of what's happening, a truer version of people's victimisation, of people's fears about crime, people's perceptions of the police - that to me is a key element of what criminology is all about. It's about digging for the truth however difficult that might be to cope with. It's better than continuing to have rather artificial debates about the significance of the official recorded crime rate which criminologists have always known is really, in some ways, not worth the paper it's written on.

What about the discipline of criminology itself? Is there a sense of where it should be going?

I hesitate somewhat in answering that. I think one of the elements, which again reflects my own particular interest, is that in terms of research activity, for many years now, and not just from the Home Office and the official sources, but almost equally from the ESRC, most funded research has found itself directed towards applied criminology - the criminal justice side. Most criminological research at this present time is about evaluation. We are part of the evaluative culture, the managerialism that permeates the criminal justice process. We inevitably have been sucked into that because we want to research; we have to do research. There are some important questions for the discipline, and once we step back a bit from the very pressured business of doing the research, we will have to consider them.

There is a tremendous amount of activity going on in evaluating the Crime and Disorder Act. But I think there is a need to stand back and ask: are we doing this simply because that's where there is research money? We are academic criminologists, we are independent of government. I do think we need to take stock collectively within the criminological community, of that relationship between the

discipline of criminology, the nature of the evaluative process, and the question that was raised in a very different context in the 60's by Howard Becker. "Whose Side Are We On"?

Now Becker raised it in a very different context - the context of radical criminology. But I think many of us involved in the day to day business of evaluating government initiatives in crime prevention and criminal justice - have to have some sort of answer to the question, *Whose side are we on?* This would normally be 'we are not on any side'. As a discipline we need to get to grips with the nature of the independence of criminology in this sort of activity.

As to where the fundamental, the core activity of criminology - theorising - fits into this, I would want a bit more time to reflect on that. For different reasons of interest and perhaps personal inclination, I've tended to be more interested during my career in the applied field of criminology so that I've never engaged personally in the theoretical debate which clearly continues to influence students and colleagues. Similarly, the relationship between theoretical opinions of evaluation is an issue which it is important for us to tease out more than we often have time to do.

A prospective student visiting Hull, thinking about doing criminology, meets you and asks what is criminology? What would you say to them?

After inviting them to sign up for our new module entitled 'Invitation to Criminology' I think a simple answer to that, which may not really take them very much further, would be that it's both about trying to understand why people commit crime and why crime occurs, trying to understand patterns of crime both historically and in the contemporary world. That, I think, must always be the core definition of criminology as it was in its positivist origins in the 19th century. But I would always go on in the same sentence, to say that whilst its core function is trying to understand the nature of crime and offenders, it's also about taking a critical look at how society responds to the issue of crime and criminals.

I would hope also that the study of criminology would enable

them to get behind the images that inevitably they will be faced with every day, from the media or even just pub conversation, where the media and the public too are striving not only for answers, but also for an over-simplification of the issue of crime.

There is a way in which the media like to demonise certain sorts of crime whether it's the serial killer, or the child abuser. I would hope that criminology enables the people who study it, and by extension other people, to get away from this idea, this need to demonise certain offenders and to compartmentalise the approach to crime. One of the characteristics of the positivists was that their mission for a good hundred years was to find out what was the difference between the offenders and the non-offenders. I think, and have thought for many years, that a key message of criminology is that most offenders are the same as the rest of us. To the extent that that is believed, there is therefore no real fundamental theory of most crime. Criminology is about recognising that the vast majority of offenders are not distinguishable from other members of the community in terms of their backgrounds or their personal characteristics. To the extent that there are some people, some offenders whose behaviour is extreme, the message of criminology is that we have got to recognise that they are also products of a society. We shouldn't seek to disown them either, through the media, by putting them on one side as deviants. We should actually recognise our responsibilities collectively for the people they are. That to me is what criminology should be doing.

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