THE POLITICS OF CRIME PREVENTION

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Mr. Michael King was one of the overseas visitors to participate at the Council's recent conference in Melbourne. He is a lawyer from Great Britain. His tertiary study was undertaken at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland and at the College of Law in London. He was admitted to practise as a solicitor of the Supreme Court in 1968. He engaged in private practice, specialising in the areas of criminal, matrimonial, landlord and tenant and Public Health Law. In 1973, he became a lecturer in Law at the University of Warwick, whilst still maintaining his private practice. In 1977-78 he was visiting associate professor in the Faculty of Law and Jurisprudence at the State University of New York. Since 1985 he has been senior research fellow in the Department of Law at Brunel University in London. Of recent years, he has done research into such diverse matters as "The Best Interest of the Child", "The Recruitment of Black People to the Legal Profession", "Social Crime Prevention in France" and "The Treatment of Young Offenders in Anglo-Saxon Countries". He has published extensively in these and other fields.

Mr. King was a significant contributor to the success of the Melbourne Conference and it is with much pleasure that we reproduce his paper on the political aspects of crime prevention.

E arly in 1988 the British Government launched two major crime prevention initiatives, *Safer Cities* and *Crime Concern*. As a follow-up, Home Office Minister, John Patten, charged representatives from several government departments to report back to him on the "real causes of crime". Meanwhile opposition parties have beamed a benign silence on Tory crime-prevention programmes. It is if as a political consensus existed which rendered sacrosanct anything purporting to be directed towards reducing the social scourge of crime. What this, articles argues, however, is that crime prevention policies, far from being neutral, apolitical expressions of the public will, are in fact highly political and that the opposition's passivity is bound in the long term to strengthen the hand of Thatcherism and the Tory Party.

The construction of crime as a major social problem demanding an immediate and effective government response has for at least the past hundred years allowed politicians in general but the political part in power, in particular, to define the problem, distil the issues and offer solutions which promote and sustain its particular collective vision of the ideal society and the ways of achieving that ideal.

This does not mean that there are not causes of criminal behaviour, but rather that the reasons why an individual engages in a particular form of behaviour are so complex that explanations are necessarily constructed from selective and simplified accounts. What factors are selected from an almost endless list of possible influences on behaviour and the way they are simplified for public consumption depend upon essnetially political decisions. Recent examples of such selectivity are the promotion by Home Office Ministers of "squire town violence" and "larger louts" as matters of major social concern. These have allowed ministers such as John Patten to identify as important causes of crime, alcohol, bordeom and lack of self-discipline and at the same time to reject poverty, or unemployment as relevant factors.

A very different approach to the analysis of crime and its prevention to that promoted by politicians, the police, and the media treats with considerable scepticism any claims that the effectiveness of crime prevention programmes upon people's behaviour may be adequately measured and evaluated through the official crime statistics or positivistic methods such as before/after or experiment group/control group studies. It argues that, in the face of such complexity, it is relatively easy for politicians and others having a stake in the continuation or cessation of specific programmes or policies to privilege certain factors for research or to highlight those aspects of research results which support their particular cause. Crime prevention, like crime control is seen, therefore, essentially political in nature and not as a rational, disinterested attempt to alter social behaviour in ways that are amenable to scientific evaluation. It points, moreover, to the ways in which the anxieties and strong emotions of fear, anger and pity that crimes evoke, may be exploited by governments as powerful vehicles for moulding public attitudes and beliefs.

Indeed, one does not have to look very hard to find all the main elements of the Thatcherism lurking behind the seemingly benevolent facade of the Government's present crime prevention policies. One may have some sympathy with certain Home Office ministers in their efforts to tread a path which will not lead to a headlong collision with the Tory Party Conference, or, worse still, the Prime Minister. Any attempt, therefore, to replicate the French Socialist Party's crime prevention policy of major state intervention to achieve social cohension and integration of marginalised groups (New Society, 23rd October, 1987) would clearly have posed serious problems for a government which has firmly set its mind against welfare intervention and consistently emphasised the importance of individual responsibility, initiative and self-discipline within the context of a free-market economy as the *only* way of achieving "the good life". Moreover, in view of the major cuts in public spending and the systematic dismantling of "the welfare state" undertaken by the Conservative Government, it is not surprising, that Home Office Ministers should wish to avoid any political discourse which raises the possibility that social factors, such as relative poverty, poor housing, long-term youth unemployment, or failures in the education system and financial insecurity might relate to law-breaking.

As the self-styled party of "law and order" the Conservatives find themselves wedded to a rhetoric which portrays those who break the law as abnormal, that is different in fundamental ways from "decent citizens". It is a discourse that precludes any explanations which might detract from this simplistic classification of people into criminals and non-criminals. The Prime Minister's description of the violent football supporters as "Animals" and the Home Secretary's reference to young offenders who display "a moral brutishness" are only the most recent of a long list of degrading epithets used by Tory politicians to distinguish law-breakers from law-abiders.

This stigmatisation and degradation of offenders is not entirely abandoned in the Home Office's crime prevention literature; it is merely modified. *Practical Ways to Crack Crime,* issued by the Home Office as part of its crime prevention campaign states, for example that the "reliance by *criminals* on the easy opportunity is the key to much crime prevention ... If opportunities like this did not exist, *criminals* would have a much harder time." (p.1) (emphasis added). The term "criminals" is being used here to refer

among others to those whom authors of the book let themselves described earlier as "adolescents and young men, the majority of whom stop offending as they grow older" and for whom "the peak age for offending is 15". (p.1). Elsewhere in this publication the same people are identified by the acts they commit — they are the "burglars", "thieves" and "bullies" against whom we should be protecting our property and our children — or by the fact that they are "strangers" and not part of our "community".

A more common rhetorical device in the Government's crime prevention literature is simply to leave as unidentified those who commit the offences. Crimes are, therefore, portrayed as personal misfortunes, where the perpetrators are either invisible like microbes or viruses or remain shadowy, faceless and evil. Crime prevention in the British context is taking steps to guard against these personal misfortunes.

We find the Home Secretary telling his audience at the launch of *Crime Concern,*

> "Crime is not something visited on us from another planet. It is not something over which we can have no influence ...
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> ... crime prevention should be an essential part of the daily routine for the whole community. By making it second nature to consider crime prevention possibilities and weaknesses the scope of the opportunistic, selfish and thoughtless petty offender can be drastically reduced."

This rhetoric leaves the way clear for the "target-hardening", "fortress mentality" "practical" version of crime prevention which characterises the main thrust of the Conservative Government's approach. Indeed, *Practical Ways to Crack Crime,* resembles very closely a glossy publicity bronchure for anti-crime devices. On one page, for example, there are large colour photos of screech alarms alongside a picture of a middle-aged woman walking along a deserted street at night and another of two younger women waiting by a bus-stop. (p.5). Further on a bright crimson image of a house burglar alarm stands out from surrounding pictures of various forms of window and door locks. These pictorial images of technological anti-crime products are accompanied by copious and detailed advice in the text on how to "protect yourself", "protect your home" and "protect your family". (p.12). The pervading values are those of consumerism, individualism and self-reliance.

This compatibility with Tory social policies extends also to the very concepts of "community" and "neighbourhood" promoted in the crime prevention literature and in the establishment of Neighbourhood Watch and Homewatch schemes in Mollington, Cheshire in 1982. According to the Home Officer, there are now well over 40,000 such schemes throughout England and Wales, covering an estimated 3.5 million households.

While the principal objectives of watch schemes is to encourage people to protect their homes and property and to provide information to the police about suspicious activity in the area, they are also being publicised by the Government as a means of promoting neighbourliness and social cohesion. To this end *Practical ways to Prevent Crime,* for example, reproduces at considerable length interviews with Neighbourhood Watch and Homewatch co-ordinators which emphasise this aspect of the schemes.

> "... People have got to know each other much better — not as busybodies, but as *real neighbours* and there's a *real community atmosphere* ..." ... It's so fulfilling to get people to talk to each other and make them *aware of their neighbours."* (Coleen Atkins, a Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinator in Bedford, p. 20).
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> "It's not only run for crime prevention purposes — it's also *community exercise*. We do things like send flowers to people in hospital and the bereaved." (Arthur Jakins, Sheffield, P. 33) (emphasis added).

It is all rather reminiscent of the "community spirit" which is supposed to have flourished during the war years and, as such,

represents a nostalgic, idealised view of "the community" and "the neighbourhood", where, in the face of threats from an external, invisible enemy, everyone, regardless of class, colour, creed and political affiliations, gets together to repulse the enemy and to help and support one another through the difficult times.

However, both the rhetoric and the structural arrangements for Neighbourhood Watch go much further in promoting the Government's political objectives than merely encouraging a nostalgia for an idealised past. As in the British Government's "opting out" policy in education and housing, crime prevetnion as expressed in the watch schemes, effectively leap-frogs the local authority and goes straight to "the people". In the light of the Government's determination to weaken local government's powers, it is perhaps not too surprising, therefore, to find local councils largely ignored for the development and management of watch schemes and indeed in crime prevention generally, with the police being entrusted with these tasks. Indeed, in its pictorial representation of "Your Community" in *Practical Ways to Crack Crime* (p.26). The Police Crime Prevention Officer is presented as the pivot of all crime prevention activity, while the Town Hall does not receive a mention and the local authority is only obliquely referred to as "Planners" of building developments.

Government policy towards "young people who offend" needs to be distinguished from its attitude towards "criminals" and is rather more complicated. In their public statements, the Tories impose upon parents and teachers, what Steve Norris, the Director of Crime Concern calls, "a special responsibility for young people in their charge."

The fact that much of the help for young people by "the community" is actually happening outside the Government's official crime prevention initiative, in programmes and projects organised by the voluntary sector, local authorities and the police is not simply a matter of convenient division of labour. Rather it is, part of a clear policy by the Government to distance itself from anything that could be construed as the soft line of social welfare intervention. Such distancing enabled government departments in 1986-7, for example, to give over £15 million to NACRO, the largest voluntary agency undertaking social crime prevention work.

The other politically "acceptable" way which the Government has found to support both morally and financially social crime prevention activities for young people is through the criminal justice system. This has taken two main forms. The first is through the development of Intensive Intermediate Treatment (I.I.T.) in recent years into highly structured programmes, often staffed by local authority social workers, offering an alternative to custody to youngsters some of whom would otherwise have found themselves in detention or youth custody centres.

It may seem strange that a government which began its first term of office, by announcing tough measures against young criminals, should now be applauding these programmes of treatment within the community. The answer to this enigma lies only partly in economics — the price of a place on an I.I.T. scheme working out much cheaper than board and keep at one of Her Majesty's youth custody or detention centres. Even this Government needs to supplement purely economic arguments with ideological rationale in order to justify such a major reversal of policy. In fact the new approach of I.I.T. fits in snuggly with the New Right's philosophy on crime control.

Above all, it places considerable pressure on local authority Social Services Departments to share decisions over the form and content of I.I.T. schemes with the trusted magistracy. By applying the reduction in custodial sentences as one of the main measures of success, I.I.T. programmes have come to depend increasingly on the approval of the juvenile court justices and, in general, this approval is likely to be forthcoming only if the magistrates are satisfied that the alternative offered by I.I.T. is "not just a soft option". What we are seeing, therefore, is the demands of criminal justice for self-control

and individual responsibility imposing themselves upon social work policy and practice towards children and young people.

Another example is the rapid spread of cautioning panels and juvenile bureaux. These consist of social workers and policemen, who decide together whether young offenders should be prosecuted and, if not, what sort of alternative intervention is necessary. Here the incentive for social workers' participation is that of keeping young people out of the courts and away from what they perceive as the negative effects on their self-image and life chances of any involvement in the formal criminal justice systems.

The proliferation of these filtering structures and the expansion of I.I.T. schemes is seen, by *The Association for Juvenile Justice* and by many of those working with young people as a victory against the hitherto repressive policies of the juvenile courts. An alternative interpretation, however, would be to see the involvement of police officers in decisions as to whether a particular child would benefit from social work help (with or without a formal caution) or of magistrates on the content of therapeutic programmes as intrusions of what are essentially criminal justice principles into areas of social intervention which previously were guided by the social worker's assessment of the needs of the child and family.

Yet the debate as to who is invading whose territory is largely irrelevant. What is important is the fact that the line between social work and policing is becoming increasingly blurred and that the Government has recently done much to blur it even further by encouraging the movement towards the reactive, policing aspects of social work practice in the area of both child abuse and juvenile justice, while, at the same time, through massive cuts in local authorities' social services, severely limiting the scope of social workers for expensive preventive, welfare intervention. The growing influence of the courts and police over social work practice may be seen as an example of a more general policy of 'knocking social workers into shape' so that they can be seen as working towards the Thatcherite vision of a healthy British society rather than against it.

Whatever resistance there may be among social workers to their new role as social policemen, the movement of the police into preventive social work seems to have met with unbridled enthusiasm from forces up and down the country. The Staffordshire Police Activity and Community Enterprise (SPACE), for example, now organise a community programme which arranged over the summer holidays for 25,000 children to participate in 20,000 periods of sport and recreational activity at more than 30 centres staffed by police.

Moreover, both in multi-agency and community programmes the police through their increasing control of the purse-strings are able to have a significant influence over the nature and content of social activities for children and young people. The South Yorkshire Police Urban Action Scheme, for instance, has provided £50,000 for Urban Action Projects, where "there is a significant amount of police involvement in the planning and execution." Moreover, this scheme's information sheet makes it clear that the objective is not merely to keep young people off the streets, but

"to create opportunities for police officers and *young employed/disadvantaged people* to meet together and, hopefully, lead to a dialogue with the object of breaking down prejudices *to the benefit of society and the individual.*" (emphasis added)

The publicity blurb for the scheme goes even further in its attempt to promote the image of the police as a caring body which has the welfare of young people at heart, rather than a force for repression and coercive control.

"These opportunities provided by a *concerned Police Authority* and pursued by trained and *caring police* officers throughout the Country can create an environment in which disadvantage need not be an obstacle to one's contribution to a well-ordered society." (emphasis added)

It is not only in the organisation of activities for children that local authorities are being forced to take a backseat in social welfare intervention. They are even reduced to little more than interested observers even in those formal administrative structures of the Conservative crime prevention programme specifically designed to tackle crime at a *local* level through eliciting co-operation between agencies. While the rhetoric of both **Crime Concern** and **Safer Cities** speaks of partnership between local organistions, statutory and voluntary, public and private, and the encouragement of local initiatives, the reins of control for both these organisations are firmly in the hands of central government and, more precisely, Home Office ministers and those appointed directly by them. In neither of these organisation is their any accountability to the local electorate or any local control over which local projects should receive major funding. While Douglas Hurd, the Home Secretary in his written statement at the launch of Safer Cities emphasises the need for "all sections of the community to work together in partnership" and "drawing the maximum effect from this local partnership", it is clear from the small print that the senior partner with the controlling interest will remain firmly seated in his Whitehall office. What in fact is being offered to those local authorities that receive a Home Office invitation to participate in Safer Cities is responsibility with virtually no power. Indeed, the only clear power to be exercised by the local steering committee, is to approve grants of up to £500. Unlike Safer Cities, **Crime Concern** does not even make any claim to be community based, since it operational headquarters are in Westminster and its Chief Executive and staff will operate from there rather than from local offices in different parts of the country.

Of course, the Government's crime prevention programme could fall flat on its face, if the level of criminality as defined by the official statistics continued to rise. In fact, the anticipated decrease in the teenage and young adult populations of the country virtually guarantees that it will fall dramaticlly over the next few years. There is little doubt that this fall will be interpreted and publicised by the Government as a major success for its anti-crime policies and make it even more difficult for opposition parties to promote any alternative view of crime, its causality and its prevention.

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This article has been adapted from a longer essay comparing British and French Crime prevention policies, which is shortly to appear in the Howard Journal.