Reviews

David Wilson& John Ashton, What Everyone in Britain Should Know About Crime And Punishment, Blackstone Press, London (1998) ISBN 1 85431 7369

David Wilson, a former prison governor, and John Ashton, a freelance researcher/ journalist, set out to inform the British public about the realities of crime and punishment. In the Introduction they argue that the book was a needed project that focused on correcting some fundamental problems with understanding crime and criminal justice, as well as problems created by contemporary policing and punishment practices. The authors argue that many 'expert', academics, professionals and members of the public are frustrated by the expansion of the criminal justice system; the mythical foundations of notions of crime and justice which feed the public's fear of crime and are manipulated by both past Tory and present New Labour governments; the lack of accountability and effectiveness in the burgeoning costs of criminal justice; and; the indications of Britain becoming an entrenched policed 'Gulag' state.

Do the authors achieve their objectives? Is the British public more likely to hold informed and realistic views about crime and justice matters? Is Britain likely to change policy directions in light of the arguments presented by Wilson and Ashton? I will return to these questions later. First, I wish to set out what kinds of issues are covered.

The first Chapter deals with the problem of defining and recording crime, provides a very brief overview of conservative and conflict perspectives on the causes of crime and discusses the rise in law and order politics since the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979. Contrary to what the public might expect, comparative crime survey data indicate that crime victimisation rates and the public's fear of crime in England and Wales are higher than in the United States and, in fact, are the highest of eight European countries surveyed. Further, Wilson and Ashton point out the growth in police and prison service budgets, as well as the adoption of right-wing rhetoric such as 'prison works'as the antidote to rising levels of crime. In conclusion, the authors contend that both the Conservatives and New Labour have law and order policies that emphasise individualism - personality responsibility and morality choices as weapons to fight crime. Structural factors as contributors to the causes of crime have been 'effectively abandoned'. There is a return to causation in Chapter 4 and at the end of the book.

Prison population and prison costs data are presented in Chapter 2. These figures establish that Britain is experiencing a prison boom and that, if current imprisonment rates continue, the number of inmates will have increased by about 70% from 1987 to 2005. Not surprisingly, there has been a blow out in prison construction and operational costs for HM Prison Service. In addition, the chapter highlights the failure of prisons when considering reconviction rates and raises the possible social and economic costs that might take place in Britain if we consider the massive growth in America's industrial-correctional complex.

Arguing that total abolition is not possible or desirable, Wilson and Ashton sketch out the requirements of just, humane and rehabilitative incarceration.

The next chapter turns to some elaboration of public concern about crime and perceived leniency within the criminal justice system. Here, the authors take a raw and informative look at the distortion of fear fuelled by the media, whether that is based on the 'horrific' Bulger case or the 'Inspector Morse' television series. Their concern is to establish in readers' minds the generation of moral panics that have occurred throughout British history from the nineteenth century to current times. But the media and the public are not to be entirely blamed for misconceptions about crime and justice. Wilson and Ashton take aim at politicians of various persuasions, drawing attention to populist politics which underpin a law and order agenda. Chapter 3 concludes with a warning not to be complacent about the extension of private prisons in Britain, again with some reference to their growth experiences in the United States.

Young people and crime is the focus of Chapter 4. The central theme running through this chapter is that young people tend to be viewed as society's threats or enemies and, consequently, become principal targets for various 'get tough' approaches to crime. The book asserts that New Labour's Crime and Disorder Bill centres on the wrong aspects of youth justice. Instead of focusing on young people and parents to take responsibility for behaviour and getting tougher (by, for example, removing the presumption of *doli incapax*, imposing curfews, strengthening supervision orders and reparation schemes), Wilson and Ashton favour approaches that retain critical questions of crime causation, the centrality of the school as the institutional domain most likely to impact on offending behaviours and humane preventative measures. While a few school-based programs are briefly described, the book provides little in terms of a sound fundamental theoretical basis on which prevention policies can be developed.

Chapter 5 takes up the issue of race and its reflection in the operations of the British criminal justice system. The focus of discussion concerns discrimination against Muslim, Asian and black communities at various stages of criminal justice processing by authorities. A crux of the argument is that 'discretion provides opportunities for discrimination, and that the impact of that discrimination becomes cumulative' (p 84). According to the authors, to bring about a substantial improvement in the state of affairs requires action beyond monitoring systems and vacuous policy statements. They suggest real use of monitoring data to eradicate areas of discrimination, training programs in race relations for personnel and positive discrimination recruitment practices to increase race and ethnic minorities as criminal justice system personnel.

Gender issues are presented in Chapter 6. Here we return to the prison and non-custodial sentences. Since 1990, the imprisonment rate for young women has increased more sharply than the rate for men. At the same time, the use of non-custodial options for women is relatively rare which partly explains the gross over-incarceration of young women for non-violent offences. Once inside the walls, the prison service is ill-equipped to deal with drug related problems and community re-integrative strategies (including those targeted on employment and accommodation). Further, family relationships, particularly between mother and child, is severely disrupted for many of these women who pose no real risk for the public and should not be imprisoned in the first place.

A topical issue for the Australian public gets attention in Chapter 7. Wilson and Ashton contend that Britain's get tough and total prohibition approaches to tackling the drug problem fail to offer any radical or politically courageous policies. Policing has not reduced the supply of drugs and has resulted in imprisoning small-scale offenders. Drug related

problems are acknowledged and, like others elsewhere, the authors believe that the key for future drugs policy lies in decriminalisation and a harm minimisation/harm reduction based drug education strategy. With regard to heroin, Wilson and Ashton advocate heroin prescription, citing the rise of heroin related crime problems since the introduction of the Dangerous Drug Act 1996. Between 1920 and 1967 heroin related crime did not produce such social problems when heroin prescription was available. Similar findings occurred between 1985-1990 in a pilot prescription program for heroin and other drugs in Merseyside.

Chapter 8 highlights the failure of expanded policing, through increased funding, recruitment, powers and strategies to reduce crime in Britain. The authors trace the development of community policing and consultative committees to bolster police-community relations. They argue that such developments, in the years when major concerns about police malpractice have been expressed, have not provided improved contacts with the general public and have not secured consultative processes for establishing policing priorities in local communities. The chapter concludes with reference to aggressive policing policies such as zero tolerance. Also, Wilson and Ashton raise a concern about whether performance management changes in the British police will further the gap that exists between the police and the public.

Changes in the probation service throughout the twentieth century are sketched in Chapter 9. To create a safer Britain, the book argues that probation, rather than prisons, offers a more cost effective option, greater potential to assist the re-integration of offenders back into communities and effective crime preventative approach. Wilson and Ashton hope that probation programs build on examples of good practice and take more of a lead role in the development of a new 'Corrections Service'.

The final 'Chapter', 'A Vision for the Future', is disappointing for those readers who are looking for a detailed blueprint of how Britain might effectively address the causes of crime. The book began with a discussion of the problems associated with defining and measuring crime. Here, however, Wilson and Ashton quote questionable crime figures to urge New Labour to adopt the French model 'which forged links between the situational, political, and social dimensions of crime prevention, as well as creating a link between youth crime and social justice' (p 157). While it is important to argue that Britain should avoid following the footprints of the United States, in terms of its experiences and forays into aspects of crime and criminal justice, their conclusion is somewhat hollow. If crime prevention is to be taken seriously, I would have thought the authors would have taken more time to explain its fundamental elements to the public. Surely, a social policy vision for the future should assume some responsibility for spelling out a framework that reduces the likelihood of creating a set of social program shams and engineering yet another series of public misconceptions about crime and justice. History demonstrates the expropriation of the meaning of particular language (e.g. there is no such thing as 'society' according to Margaret Thatcher) by politicians in their 'quick fix' proposals to address the complexities of crime in the true community.

Overall, *What Everyone in Britain Should Know About Crime and Punishment* does provide the British public with an informed account of important matters concerned with crime and justice. While numerous other texts provide readers with detailed exposes of the linkages between politics and the developments that have taken place in prisons, the probation service and the British police, Wilson and Ashton give their target audience a clearer sense of these matters than can be derived from newspaper or magazine feature articles. They demonstrate an awareness of developments that are related to more recent

political, social and economic trends. Further, the book is made relevant by reference to particular cases, most of which would be familiar to the British public.

As to whether Britain is likely to change criminal justice policy directions as a result of this publication, I think not. The days when there is an informed context of policy making in matters concerned with crime and justice appear to be some way off. Informing the public is a useful beginning. Undergraduate criminal justice and criminology students would also find the book a readable introductory excursion across many issues that are covered in their courses.

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