

Launch of Rethinking Crime and Punishment (RCP) Manifesto

July 3rd 2007

1. The manifesto comes at the end of seven years work based on a great deal of research and action in the field of alternatives to prison. It also comes at a time when prison policy in England and Wales is at a crossroads.
2. My main job is as director of the International Centre for Prison Studies at Kings' College. It is interesting that in England and Wales the last 15 years have seen prison numbers rise more sharply than almost any other comparable country (New Zealand is the exception). On top of this the government has decided to expand the capacity of the prison system by a further 15% with the Conservatives pledging to match that and more.
3. This planned expansion has been based on remarkably little public debate. Last week Lord Ramsbotham called for a standing royal commission on criminal justice and the House of Commons Justice Committee is holding an inquiry into the effectiveness of spending. But Lord Carter's review "Securing the Future" on which government has based its policy looked very narrowly at the issue of supply of and demand for prison places concluding that demand was inexorably upward and that supply could be provided more cheaply among other ways through Titan prisons.
4. There has been nothing in England and Wales remotely along the lines of the Scottish Prison Commission which earlier this week recommended cutting Scotland's prison population by a third. This is surprising given that as a Conservative front bencher said in a debate in sentencing last month "the rise in the number of prisoners from 60,000 to 83,000 should not be a point of pride. It should be a point of shame"
5. What this manifesto contains is an alternative agenda for England and Wales, with some proposals for how the £2.3 billion earmarked for prison expansion could

instead be used to strengthen alternative measures to deal with offenders.

6. Based on the learning from both phases of RCP, the manifesto advances two basic propositions. First that community based alternatives need to be made to work better primarily as alternatives for the 50,000 people a year given short prison sentences – through more investment in supervision provided by probation and other organisations; by better dialogue with judges and magistrates and better links with the public.
7. And second, that more radical alternatives are developed for groups who fare particularly badly in prison - women, children and young people and the mentally ill.
8. To address shortfalls in community supervision, RCP is proposing that probation and other community organisations intensify their provision of services- for example through trackers who can provide close support to secure compliance, through the national development of RJ options and the strengthening of the intermediate estate- hostels, halfway houses and other measures both to meet the needs of and effectively supervise challenging people in the community.
9. RCP is suggesting much more regular and thorough visits by sentencers to community based programmes for offenders with the opportunity for proper dialogue- based on the work we have piloted in Thames Valley, Cheshire and London. That work also suggests much greater use of reviews- progress courts as they are being called in Scotland. Currently limited to drug treatment cases and the community justice centres, there is undoubtedly scope for expansion.
10. The manifesto also calls for more systematic links with the public – along the lines of the Making Good initiative in the Thames Valley. We do not go as far as recommending uniforms but there is much in Louise Casey’s recent report that resonates with RCP’s findings about the importance of engaging communities, We also think it is important for the proposed sentencing commission exercises a public education role,

11. The second main proposition is that there are groups of people in prison who could be dealt with in other ways - women, children and the mentally ill. We call for accelerated progress on Corston with funds made available in each region to urgently develop alternatives. The manifesto proposes that the forthcoming Youth Crime Action plan sets an ambitious target for halving the numbers of young people in custody over five years through the development of more intensive supervision schemes, professional fostering placements and family group conferencing. And we would like to see a national roll out of the kind of link worker schemes on the revolving doors model to address the needs of people with mental health problems who go in and out of prison.
12. The manifesto contains an indicative costing for these elements which in total comes to £2.3 billion over six years. This is exactly the capital sum which the government appears to have secured from the contingency reserve to build new prison places including three Titan prisons.
13. RCP's work suggests that this spending represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to invest instead in alternatives to prison that could bring about better outcomes for offenders and their victims. Two questions will be raised.
14. First, what about the prison population? Will these proposals guarantee a fall? It is true that those serving short sentences of 12 months or under represent only 12% of the sentenced prison population on any one day. But in addition to impacting on that segment of the population, we think that the proposals could have other effects. Offering courts more options at the remand stage thus reducing the pre-trial population; providing wider options for the Parole Board when they are making release decisions; enhancing the compliance of offenders with community supervision and thus reversing the growing use of prison for breach. And perhaps most importantly by reducing re-offending rates and thus shrinking the pool of candidates for imprisonment.
15. The second issue is that of public attitudes. RCP's work on public attitudes has confirmed what a range of surveys have found, that the public is not as punitive as is often thought. True, asked a straight question three quarters will say sentences

should be harsher. But given information about the reality of cases, and what community options entail, they actually rank prison rather low down the list of preferences.

16. Our conclusion at the end of the first phase of RCP in 2004 was that “Political leadership should be exercised to emphasise the goal of reducing the prison population while promoting the value of alternatives to prison.” It is perhaps even more relevant today.

Rob Allen, July 3rd 2008