

How to (virtually) empty the prisons overnight

by Alexander Baron

The government's response to rising crime has been a multipronged strategy of more intense policing and surveillance, repressive and in some cases totalitarian laws and an expanded programme of prison building. Time and again politicians of all major parties appear on TV and in the media, each attempting to outdo the other in proposing more Draconian "solutions" to problems they themselves have created and to demand even stiffer sentences for all classes of "criminals". Irresponsible, sensationalist and downright dishonest reporting by the entire media (not just the tabloids) lump all criminals in the same boat. While most people - including most Brixton inmates - would agree that unprovoked crimes of violence, serious thefts, terrorism etc should warrant stiff sentences, there are large numbers of people who are serving sentences not because they have committed "crimes" in any meaningful sense, but because powerful pressure groups, vested interests and social taboos have made otherwise lawful activity illegal. So much hysteria has been generated by "the

war on drugs" that it is almost impossible to debate this subject rationally. Hard drugs are illegal almost everywhere and heavy sentences are passed on even minor dealers and users. The usual argument is that drugs are dangerous, they kill people, they breed crime. Well motor vehicles are dangerous, they kill people (probably many more than heroin or cocaine) and they too can be used in crime! Furthermore, many substances which are far more dangerous than drugs are freely available over the counter. Anyone, including children, can walk into their local Superdrug and buy large quantities of Vitamins A, D & E without prescription. If taken in the same quantities as heroin or cocaine, these naturally occurring essential nutrients can kill outright. Yet whoever heard of anyone committing suicide by taking too much vitamin D?

The war on drugs has also generated an enormous crime wave. Precisely because such substances are illegal

they are in short supply and therefore expensive, which makes them attractive to organised criminals. In the United States, the most shocking crime rate is the murder rate of young black men by other young black men - most of these murders and lesser crimes are drug-related. There is a serious problem here in Britain too, mostly among blacks, but this is something which transcends barriers of race and class. A parallel can be seen in the United States during the Prohibition era when gangs of mostly white young men murdered each other in turf wars over the distribution of what is today a perfectly legal product, alcohol. The legalisation of hard drugs (and soft drugs, of course) would remove the criminal element entirely. Prices would fall, the quality of heroin and other drugs would be regulated by law, multinational firms would quickly take over the market and it is doubtful if there would be any more tragic deaths than there are at present. And there would be no murders or "money

laundering" at all. Drug dealers are not, or should not, be classified as criminals. When two parties - mature, willing adults - come together to make a transaction, there is, or should be, no criminal offence. The argument that more children would be endangered by legalisation doesn't wash either, because it would still be illegal to sell drugs to children as it is tobacco and alcohol. And who would want to risk heavy fines or imprisonment selling small quantities of hard drugs to children when there were big legal profits to be made servicing the adult market? Another aspect of the "war on drugs", and a most frightening one, is that it has led to the erosion of civil liberties in other fields. Anyone who has studied the Money Laundering Regulations (1986) and similar statutes will realise that banking confidentially is all but dead in Britain. Powers granted to police, customs and other agencies to combat this mythical menace have been quietly extended. One American politician is reputed to have said

What has changed?
this photograph of two starving women looking at their soon-to-die children was taken by W.W. Hooper during the Madras famine of 1876 - 1878.



"We can win the war on drugs if we have the guts to turn America into a police state". Anyone who shares that sentiment should bear in mind that once a police state has been created, anyone and everyone can and will be tyrannised, eg. Jews (and others) in Nazi Germany and the masses (and the party faithful) in Soviet Russia.

Prostitution is called the oldest profession in the world.

Although soliciting and living off immoral earnings are still illegal, prostitution itself is practised in every major town throughout the land if not throughout the world. Prostitutes advertise openly in newspapers and newsagents' windows. Taking prostitution - in all its forms - out of the statute books altogether would, like legalising drugs, free up a lot of police time to pursue real criminals.

The current government has made it all but impossible for many people to claim state benefits. The regulations are immensely complex

and fill up shelves and claimants are paid a pittance. In addition to this is the poverty trap into which countless members of the "criminal element" fall. Today we live in a high technology world; there is less and less demand for unskilled manual labour. Anyone who is over thirty and doesn't have an impressive laser printed CV will realise how difficult it is to find even a moderately paid job. With increasing interchange of information between large (and not so large) companies and our competitive "free market" only the most promising candidates will even get an interview. The current proposed register of paedophiles is already long out of date; criminal convictions of potential employees are often freely available to companies, as are financial details. Any job applicant who is honest enough (or dumb enough) to admit that he has done time will receive a polite refusal.

Face it, does anyone in his right mind want to employ anyone who has been inside or who has even a minor conviction for theft?

As a consequence of this, the only jobs open to most ex-cons are the lowliest paid of menial work. And then only to some. Unable to earn a living wage, or any wage at all, tempts or forces many of them back into a life of crime.

The Green Party (and others going back much further) advocate a basic income payable to all citizens. The usual claim that the cost of such a scheme would be prohibitive is nonsense when one considers the billions that are squandered in paying for the overstuffed Social Security bureaucracy, Benefits Agency snoops, and the prosecution of "scroungers" which may cost thousands of pounds for the most minuscule of "frauds".

Abolishing the means-tested benefits system would not be prohibitively expensive; by paying every citizen

a basic income as a right, literally millions of people would be removed immediately from the poverty trap. The economy would also be stimulated and the otherwise unemployable ex-con who would normally be unable to earn a living wage would have a real incentive to find work, even lowly paid work. A part time job or several part time jobs working say twenty or twenty-five hours a week would turn his basic income into a meaningful living wage (and help break the downward spiral of re-offending).

These proposals would lead to emptying the prisons (or at least emptying many prison places), save much squandered time and effort by the police and other government agencies and reduce government spending, money which could be diverted to other far more worthy causes. Like creating an environment in which our kids don't grow up like us and fall into the same pitfalls.

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