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Tackle Crime by Increasing the Numbers of Police and Prison Places, says former Home Office Adviser

The release of disputed Home Office figures for crime has reignited debate about how to deal with the problem. Few people in Britain today are confident that the war against crime is being won. Both the Labour Government and its Conservative predecessor have made crime control a priority. But have they gone about tackling it in the right way?

In Politeia's next pamphlet *Criminal Negligence: How current policies towards Crime, Policing and Punishment fail the Nation*, Robin Harris examines what lies at the basis of the collapse of security, which leaves citizens today 'far more at risk from "ordinary" crime than from terrorism'. The author suggests that what we see about us is the consequence of decades of muddle, during which the criminal justice system has been undermined. Politicians waste time and public money arguing about the causes of crime and trying, not to tackle crime, but a vaguely defined set of supposed causes.

The police, who form the front line of battle, are subject to a framework that has become so politicised and subject to false managerial targets that leadership suffers and the ordinary police on the beat are constrained from doing the job of fighting crime and upholding order. Here, the lesson from New York is telling. In the 1990s police numbers rose there by over 40 per cent while in London they fell by 10 per cent. At the end of that period 42,000 police upheld law and order in New York and 26,500 in London. And the signal to the New York police was clear: 'Cops [were to be] Cops...[and] to be assertive'. Crime fell in New York by over 50 per cent while in London it rose by 12 per cent. The judges too have become politicised, appearing to usurp the role of parliament in making policy about punishment with the result that the fundamental principle that crime must be punished appropriately is being undermined. The failure to apprehend criminals is compounded by a system that no longer appears to understand the role of punishment.

The author analyses the debate over punishment, and in particular the role of prison, drawing on the latest evidence, which suggests that the rate of imprisonment compared with the level of actual crime is lower in Britain than the EU average, with Britain eight from the top for incarceration of criminals. The evidence, he says, is that prison works in a number of ways, from incapacitating the criminal while in prison, to serving as a deterrent. The pamphlet concludes by proposing an increase in the number of police officers from today's figure of 130,000 and to increase the use of prison by providing more prison places – an extra 153,000. These should be complemented by effective education for prisoners and rehabilitation programmes for those on drugs.

And the extra costs? These would be in the region of £12 billion a year (police and prisons) with a one-off prison building programme of about £2-£3 billion a year for five years. This would amount to a doubling of the criminal justice budget. The author suggests that with public expenditure running at £450 billion, and social security and tax credits at £124 billion, a fundamental shift of priorities away from welfare to security, away from the desirable to the essential, should be possible.

***Criminal Negligence: How current policies towards Crime, Policing and Punishment fail the Nation* by Robin Harris is published by Politeia, 22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QP.
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