

Without a pause in UK justice reforms there is a risk that enormous damage will be done to the day-to-day functioning of criminal justice in England and Wales

Last week Tim Newburn argued that Cameron's crime speech was a *delicate balancing act* between different constituencies within the Tory party. In this post [Rob Allen](#) takes further issues with the government's rhetoric, suggesting that writing what is seemingly an open cheque for prison expansion is something Cameron may come to regret.



British Prime Minister David Cameron unveiled a new "tough but intelligent" criminal justice policy this week in a major speech delivered after a visit to Wormwood Scrubs prison in West London. Having replaced a socially liberal Justice Minister with more of a hardliner last month, Cameron was expected to usher in a harsher set of policies, partly to satisfy the more punitive members of his own Conservative party and also to seek to restore some credibility with the wider electorate following a series of government blunders.

In fact the new approach appears more balanced than many progressives had feared. Whether constrained by his liberal party coalition partners, lack of funds or personal ideology, it was somewhat reassuring to hear a Prime Minister say that he was not going to try and out-bid any other politician on toughness and that prevention was better than cure. The long promised "rehabilitation revolution" in prisons is still to be pursued and there were positive words about the need to stick with people after release from prison and give them proper support, "because it's not outer space we're releasing these people into – it's our streets, our towns, among our families and our children."

Despite this, Cameron could not resist telling his audience that on the punishment of criminals he did not want there to be any doubt that he will be tougher (although tougher than what he did not say...) He wants to see people who ruin the lives of others – rapists, murderers, muggers – behind bars, and kept there for a long time and said he has always supported the principle of the life sentence, trumpeting the new two strikes and you're out mandatory life sentences for serious sexual and violent crimes. Two days after his speech, Cameron told Parliament he had no intention of complying with the European Court judgement requiring the UK to amend its blanket ban on prisoners voting.

What changes in policy and practice will this rather incoherent rhetoric produce? On custodial places, Cameron promised that for anyone sentenced to a spell in prison, there will be space. Dismissing the idea of arbitrary targets for the prison population, Cameron argued that the number of people behind bars will not be about bunks available but about how many people have committed serious crimes. Writing a seemingly open cheque for prison expansion is something he may come to regret.

Legislation is underway to make community sentences more demanding, which could increase their credibility as alternatives to short jail terms with courts and the public but could equally soak up resources and increase rates of non compliance .

But perhaps the biggest impact on criminal justice may come from the government's plans to change the way services are organised and funded. The Probation service – barely mentioned in the speech – is in effect being dismantled with plans to scatter its functions to a patchwork of private companies and charities. Rehabilitation services are to be subject to a payment by results system that has yet to show any results itself in any area of social provision. Heroic assumptions are being made about the savings which will be made by greater private sector involvement.

These changes are similar to those inflicted on the National Health Service in controversial legislation last year. In the case of the NHS the Coalition Partners the Liberal Democrats called for a pause so that

an independent and expert assessment could be undertaken of the impact of the policy. As a result important safeguards were introduced to limit the scope of the market.

In view of the disparity between the scale of the changes being proposed for criminal justice and the strength of the evidence for them, the case for a similar pause and assessment is a strong one. Without it there is a risk that whatever the rhetoric, enormous damage will be done to the day to day functioning of criminal justice in England and Wales.

This article was originally published on [Justice & Prisons](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

Rob Allen works on prison reform in the UK and internationally. From 2005 to 2010 he was director of the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) at King's College London, undertaking research on imprisonment and assisting prison systems to comply with international standards. He has undertaken prison reform work in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Prior to joining ICPS in March 2005, he ran Rethinking Crime and Punishment, an initiative on to change public attitudes to prison and alternatives in the UK. Earlier in his career, Rob was director of research and development at UK charity NACRO. He was a member of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales from 1998 to 2006 and a specialist adviser to the UK Parliament's Justice Committee. He has written widely on youth and criminal justice.

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