

"CROPS" Campaign statement in re the French students murder case.

We are sending it to The Today programme on Radio 4, and to Jon Snow on Channel 4, and to Jeremy Paxman on BBC newsnight,

best wishes,

Will Watson, Chris Hignett and Martin Page. 5/6/09

The case of the French students' murder is a highly distressing case, but is only one of a number of instances now that demonstrate the fundamental illogicality of the system that has developed under New Labour called "The National Offender Management Service" ["NOMS"].

This system has its origins in a paper produced by the Home Office in 1998 called "Joining Together to protect the Public", which called for the absorption of the Probation Service within the Prison service, despite the fact that these were completely different services with very different objectives.

The prison service exists to hold people in secure custody.

The Probation Service existed to enable people who the court felt worthy of the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to live law-abiding lives in the Community.

It was, in short, a social work service for the courts that was not solely concerned with criminal matters, but also the civil courts as well.

For the last ten years the government has been trying to bring about this illogical "marriage" which required mammoth reorganisation, from a locally based service to a centrally based one, which in its turn required huge expenditure on the construction of a new bureaucracy and the attempt to develop massively expensive computer systems.

This is where much of the extra resource that Mr Straw and Mr Wheatley boast was being spent on the probation service in fact disappeared to.

In the case of London there was even more disruption as it was attempted to merge 5 local probation services into one massive London-wide organisation, which it was fairly quickly realised was beyond the management capability of all those involved despite their very best efforts. This re-organisation also involved a reduction in front line Probation Officer staff of over two hundred Officers out of eight hundred. This shortfall has never been made up, in spite of all the extra difficult and dangerous work that has come in since the invention of NOMS.

Further attempts at re-organisation have occurred at roughly 2 yearly intervals in response to financial crises on the one hand and what are held to be failures of supervision such as in the case of the Monckton murder and the present one.

The net result has been an increasingly inexperienced front line managed by an evermore slender middle management all of whom are impossibly stretched attempting to administer an ever more complex set of systems that are supposed to be able to reduce risk of re-offending, and to protect the public.

It is worth noting that at no stage has evidence been produced that these complex systems are capable of having either effect. Indeed we would argue that it is illogical, and no amount of resources would ever ensure that a prison sentence could meaningfully be served in the community: it is simply a contradiction in terms.

We believe that the way forward lies in acknowledging this contradiction and disaggregating the prison and probation services, i.e. abolish the “NOMS”.

The prison service should concentrate on providing custodial services to those who the courts feel must be removed from the community for the time the court thinks requisite.

The probation service should return to its more modest and reasonable task of seeking to advise, assist and befriend those whom the court feels should be offered the opportunity to continue to live in the community.

This is the only honest way forward.

Such a course will not prevent shocking cases occurring but at least it avoids the dishonesty of seeking to pretend that such cases can be avoided by implying that we have techniques and tools for predicting the future behaviour of individuals of such sensitivity that we can know and manage successfully those who will be guilty of such crimes.

Chris Hignett, Will Watson, Martin Page.
LONDON : 6th June 2009.