

# Criminology and the Conservatives: reform, challenges and the hopes of a Labour-voting PhD student

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The 2015 election victory for the Conservatives seemed to be as much of a surprise to them as to the rest of us (I gave up hope after seeing the exit poll!) including the 'coalition strategy' consultants who quickly become redundant. A slim majority in itself could present a challenge to this government, who continue to propose significant changes and spending cuts across the criminal justice sector. For example, there is the desire to abolish the Human Rights Act and re-negotiate the UK's position as part of the European Court of Human Rights, and this has already met with resistance across the parties. We then see George Osborne at the recent PMQs, stepping in for David Cameron, who gave a performance which was met with a resounding 'meh', pressing ahead with his austerity plans. These seem to fly in the face of good economics according to some, but George is adamant he has got this all right and Labour have lost the argument on austerity. Perhaps Theresa May's or Boris Johnson's GE2020 auditions will fare better but, whatever we think, we have 5 years of Conservative austerity to contend with so, should we be worried?

Well, yes. Michael Gove, one of the most unpopular Education Secretaries, who has crept back into the Cabinet, succeeds Chris Grayling, one of the most despised Justice Secretaries ever to grace the corridors of power (I am basing this observation mostly on twitter, so I am prepared to give Gove a chance!). Grayling made significant and sweeping changes to the probation service, legal aid provision and his legacy will be felt for years to come, even beyond GE2020. An interesting position for Michael Gove to be in, does he reinforce Grayling's work, or undermine his colleagues' efforts to reform justice? He has a remit to manage the abolition of the Human Rights Act, among many other changes, so perhaps this is where criminologists can contribute. Research can help us understand if and how the probation service can work effectively in its newly transformed framework, to establish if the police service can re-focus its work to manage continuing budget cuts and to press home the message that as prisons are not effective in rehabilitating offenders, alternatives need to be considered. Whatever our political stance, fully understanding the impact of significant changes and austerity might at least mean the next incumbent of No. 10 could be better informed and, dare I

suggest, use evidence to form policy? May I remind you, it does say 'hopes' in the title of this article.

The Conservative Government manifesto headlines promised tougher sentencing, using short, sharp, shock methods, replacing older prisons with larger ones, making it easier to deport foreign criminals and granting more powers to the police and security services to monitor online communication. It's not surprising in an age of fear, amplified by 24-hour news channels and the like, that voters felt the country will be safer with this approach, therefore, communities will feel safer and those who break the law will be duly punished. There is plenty to criticise and be concerned about here, but for those of us who (or are aiming to) work in higher education, we do now have to embrace the focus on employability, requiring us to take a pragmatic approach to help students become professional practitioners, whilst making the most of fertile opportunities for research to understand the numerous reforms. Academics from practice backgrounds may now be teaching about a service they no longer recognise. The challenges then are not just for the government, they present some interesting implications for HEIs and researchers, and for those considering criminology and therefore, criminal justice policy and practice, as a degree topic and a future career.

Alongside this, society is facing numerous issues in which criminal justice practitioners are playing a significant part. It reveals the breadth of criminology as a discipline when we explore the problems which require solutions, as well as the potential for research and also the contemporary issues those in higher education as teachers need to be communicating to students. For example, police officers responding to incidents of public disorder are now finding much more complex issues to address, as they are often the first port of call for those suffering a mental health crisis. Such a step requires officers to implement s.136 of the Mental Health Act, whilst also needing to know about places of safety which do not include the custody suite. Those in crisis, according to a report by the Care Quality Commission, reach out to the police service for help, which they have not accessed from A&E departments or community health teams, for a variety of reasons. Concerns about mental illness and its impact on the CJS are a significant issue facing the Conservative Government, but it is also one of many. There is a drive to promise investment and resources for those with mental health issues, and more broadly for the NHS, yet both the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office are facing budget cuts of 23% over the next four years and both play their part in the management of the risks and problems posed by those with mental health issues. The challenge then, for this government, seems to be relying on services to deliver their promises, without providing them with the means to do so. However, they do have a solution –

privatisation. Whatever your views on this, it's a new framework for the CJS and the public sector, so it becomes a new framework for those of us in HE, to explore, understand and communicate to the next generation. Interesting times lie ahead of us, just one look at the range of topics available as PhD studentships this year shows how HE is investing in criminology, as it continues to grow, to fascinate and frustrate, alongside a government whose policies I do personally find baffling and I fear are misinformed but maybe I will be proved wrong. I'll let you know in about 10 years.

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