

## Themed articles

### Letters to a new Government: reflections on what might be in store

#### The need to re-imagine from basic principles

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So against all predictions, we have a majority Conservative government for the first time in eighteen years which will, all other things remaining equal, maintain the reigns of office for the next five years. Yes, with a massive swing in their favour of 0.8 percent, the Tories have managed to claim only 36.9 per cent of the votes cast. Due to the oft-discussed vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system less than a 1 per cent increase has delivered a 9 per cent uplift in the number of seats in Parliament while a 1.4 per cent swing to Labour delivered a 9 per cent fall. The Tories have been lucky, benefiting from what must seem a perfect combination - the rise of the Scottish National Party, the fall of the Liberal Democrats and a four-fold increase in the popular vote for the new kids on the block – UKIP. Whatever the reasons for this new alignment within UK politics it is clear that with an overall majority of just 12, the new government is taking this as a mandate to push further forward on what has already proved to be a particularly mean, market-driven agenda of reconstruction in which no area of welfare remains safe. Whether a different outcome to the election would have fundamentally altered or even temporarily stalled the destructive course on which the Tories are set is a moot point, and I somehow doubt that it would, but let's deal with what we have currently got.

The ideological framework in which the Conservative Party is located is set to further open up the criminal justice system to private sector provision. What can be sold, will be sold off and the industry of crime control will get fat on the profits to be made. The multinational corporations which will benefit are already lined up and it doesn't seem to matter whether they are up to the task, as long as they take the problem away from the state. When major problems arise, as they will and as they already have, the responsibility will lie with the private companies, not with the government. Private companies will continue to be rewarded with public money even when they are caught overcharging and claiming for work they have not carried out - to whit the recent scandals involving Serco and G4S - ostensibly banned from procuring public contracts, existing contracts were extended, new ones awarded and negotiations for new business continued all the time they were supposedly in disgrace (House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts 2014) making a mockery of the idea of payment by results.

Disgraceful business practices aside, we know that privatised crime control carried out on the cheap will not work. The next few years will tell what impact the great probation give-away will have. The so-called Community Rehabilitation Companies created in England and Wales are dominated by two large private sector companies and already we have heard of redundancies for skilled probation staff and their replacement with electronic cashpoint-style kiosks, care of Sodexo (Travis, 2014). In one sweep, decades of research and expertise on how to work with our troubled offenders has been swept aside and what is more, cuts to an essential public service have been cleverly masked. Of even more concern is the idea that the duty of care can be mechanised and the work of probation staff commodified in this way. Like the NHS before it, over the last five and more years the probation service has been re-parcelled and restructured in ways which have allowed its wholesale privatisation, aligning it more closely to principles which dominate market mechanisms. It is likely that those public services which remain will be subject to similar attentions - the police service better be wary!

The restructuring and discarding of public service principles will continue apace all in the name of greater efficiency and lowering the public sector debt but there is a deeper, fundamental mistrust of the principles of state welfare and public provision which lie behind these moves. For decades now the public sector has been denigrated as a failed model of delivery, slow to move, stuck in an out-dated ideological framework which is no longer able to deliver (remember Blair's modernisers!). It is worth reminding the champions of the private sector that non-profit oriented, publically-minded organisations based on principles of care and collective activism have delivered incredible innovative practice in the past - and would continue to do so if allowed to continue working in this way. The list is endless but think of women's refuges, community law centres, police monitoring groups, housing associations, community-based drug support services, all of which have changed the way we perceive social problems and which have offered meaningful solutions and services to people in need. All of which are at risk in the current ideological attack on the public sector and its ability to provide. Our nation will be greatly diminished without them. It will be less safe, more troubled, riven with social divisions and a far worse place to live. It is also worth remembering that we have a public sector, precisely because the private sector could not deliver on key issues such as health, housing and community safety.

So as Prime Minister David Cameron urges us - let's not be passively tolerant, let's not stand neutral between different values. Criminologists, zemiologists and all critical thinkers, let's re-imagine a world which is just, fair and safe and loudly state that the side we are on stands in opposition to the narrow logics of capitalism. We could start our re-imagining from some very basic principles; that people have a legitimate claim to public resources, which should, by definition be owned, managed and controlled by the public; that social justice is more effective than criminal justice; that the powerful must be closely watched and monitored and publically called to account and finally that other futures are possible.

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2014) *Transforming contract Management*. London: The Stationery Office Limited

Travis, A. (2014) 'Probation officers face redundancy in plan to replace them with machines', *The Guardian* April 1st 2015

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