
Zombies and penal reform: Unlearning and relearning future possibilities

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The recent BSC conference powerfully reminded us of the importance of humility in our search for solutions to the complexities of crime, criminality and justice. Central to this are the concepts of ‘un-learning’ and ‘re-learning’ the perspectives that have long shaped our collective approach to crime and justice. This blog reflects on insights shared and challenges us to reconsider the tacit assumptions that may hold us back from meaningful reform.

Re-learning through systems thinking

Systems thinking emphasises the interconnectedness of societal elements and how they shape and influence each other. It offers a lens through which complex issues, like crime and justice, can be better understood. Alongside learning to be comfortable in complexity, unlearning is also critical—challenging outdated assumptions, questioning entrenched beliefs, and adapting to a rapidly evolving societal landscape while orienting ourselves towards and stepping into a better future.

This theme resonated with my paper, alongside Dr Tom O’Grady from University College London, where we examined penal policymaking in our paper, *Pessimism Bias: How Criminal Justice Policymakers View their Political Constraints* based on research we had done with former Ministers and political advisors for the Better Justice Partnership. We explored how policymakers often operate under a deep-seated pessimism that inhibits meaningful reform. This “pessimism bias” is rooted in assumptions that even desirable reforms are unattainable, fostering inertia and resignation to little prospect of change.

The stuck system

A pattern of narrow horizons was recognised in former Prison and Probation Minister for England and Wales, Rory Stewart’s *Politics on the Edge*, and former Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny MacAskill’s reflections on the ongoing peripheral nature of restorative justice practices (highlighted by Dr Steve Kirkwood reflecting on the evolving nature of restorative justice), both of whom found themselves unable to exercise their political power and concluded that lethargy inhibits change. Reflecting on my career working in different systems (academic, civil society, and Parliament) seeking to effect change, often writing the same recommendations repeatedly, to little effect, I see that this persistent inability to think beyond established approaches exists more broadly than just in our politics.

Our research also shows that adding to this inertia is the reliance on “received wisdom”—accepted notions about solutions that are rarely questioned in the justice ecosystem. Examples cited in our interviews were that the best prospects for change lay in abolishing short sentences and focusing on youth and women’s justice, for example, with a limited ability

to see beyond what were seen as relatively quick, politically palatable fixes. The rhetorical balancing act between punishment and rehabilitation, described by Professor Harry Annison as an attenuated or false promise, often present in political scripts, is also treated by reformers as a universal truth despite its limited success in driving meaningful reform.

Another aspect of my unlearning has been to see that we are all operating within a collective triangulation of blame for intransigence. Politicians often point to public opinion or media pressures, or as we found in our research, The Treasury and fellow party Parliamentarians, as constraints. Civil society organisations hold politicians and the media accountable. Meanwhile, the system sinks deeper into crisis. This cycle breeds a pervasive sense of being stuck, where everyone is busy using their residual energy and hope on incremental, sticking plaster solutions but unable to enact transformative change.

Tacit futures and zombie ideas

Our paper argued that Futurist Joy Green's concept of "tacit futures" sheds light on why this feeling of being stuck persists. Tacit futures are implicit, unspoken assumptions about the future, rooted in the past, that shape our present actions. When these assumptions remain unexamined, they stagnate, leading to "zombie tacit futures"—obsolete ideas that refuse to die, sometimes despite being debunked. These zombie ideas hold us captive, limiting our imagination.

This metaphor aptly describes the justice system's struggle with outdated narratives. It partly explains our collective inertia and our persistence in pointing the finger at others for our failure to progress. Whether it's the lingering belief that punishment changes behaviour—which persists not only in the justice system but also, as Professor Vanessa Barker noted, in the migration and border control systems (and the benefits and education systems)—despite this having been discredited in relation to parenting, the reliance on punishment and rehabilitation-oriented political scripts, the tendency to focus on easy wins whilst side-stepping more complex issues closer to the root of the problem and repeating the fallacies that things will improve immeasurably when we have more personnel or resources, these zombie ideas shape our collective approach, keeping us from imagining new possibilities and futures.

Challenging our own mindsets

As academics, advocates and policymakers, there can be an assumption of the superiority of our perspectives and approaches. We believe that we are right and others wrong. We seek our version of truth and dismiss opposing perspectives. We assume that if only we can strengthen or frame our evidence more persuasively, people will understand us, and we'll unlock change. Yet, as Professor Maximo Sozzo's compelling account of acritical applications of knowledge reminded us in relation to imperialism and colonisation, Professor Barker's shifting perspectives on Swedish exceptionalism, and Professor Keiran McAvoy's exposition of careful attempts to repair historic harms, there is a risk in blindly adhering to dominant world (and criminological) views without recognising their limitations.

A key theme emerging from the conference plenaries and a profound personal realisation recently as I took a step back from my day job to re-fresh my own approach is the need to turn the lens inward. Policy advocacy and criminological research often focus on changing others' mindsets—within and between disciplines, the public, politicians, or the media. But what if the

change needs to start with us? How do we unlearn the collective wisdom that may no longer serve us and reimagine a future untethered by zombie ideas?

This shift requires humility and curiosity. By acknowledging these limitations and embracing a mindset of curiosity, we can begin to ask different questions which step into the complexity. What assumptions are we holding onto? How might we harness our energy to envision what's possible rather than perpetuate what's broken? How can we dismantle the shared convictions that have shaped justice policies and our positions on reform for decades? How do we move beyond some of the now distinctly less certain pillars of knowledge that have long underpinned our approaches? How do we re-evaluate practice-based complexities, like the debunking of the strength of evidence for the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model, the sex offender treatment programmes that caused more harm than good, or perhaps even the emphasis on criminogenic needs as a means to drive up inclusion and drive down recidivism which has resulted in a system which breaks people down into parts, pushes them through silos and pays a multitude of services to 'fix' them. And how do we ensure that these assumptions do not get so baked into our systems, in assessments, expensive IT systems, interventions, and commissioning arrangements, that it is almost impossible to fathom how they might be unpicked?

Surfacing and releasing assumptions

Joy Green warns that if we fail to examine our tacit assumptions, we risk remaining trapped in outdated paradigms, unable to make a meaningful impact. This challenge is particularly acute for changemakers within and around mainstream institutions, where zombie tacit futures often dominate. She proposes that to break free, we must surface and release these unconscious assumptions. This involves not just intellectual critique but also emotional and cognitive unlearning.

Reimagining possibilities through reflexivity and humility

The conference discussions underscored the urgency of reimagining what's possible in criminological contributions to justice reform and how we might redirect our energies from proving our long-held hypotheses about how we fix the system to envisioning a radically different future. This requires not just incremental change but a fundamental rethinking of our approaches, notwithstanding all the amazingly creative and participatory approaches showcased throughout the conference.

How might we bring the breadth of criminological perspectives to the mainstream to consider what new narratives could feasibly replace the zombie ideas dominating policy discourse? What possibilities for our future have we not yet considered as we let go of our past?

A call for collective imagination

Professors Alistair Frazer and Richard Sparks reflected on criminology's role in a democratic society seeking to recover from deep polarisation, mistrust and the impact of disinformation, with Alistair espousing 'humble criminology'. To me, this means that in any renewed efforts to take criminology public, we must ask ourselves how we move beyond our past assumptions and think into the future. In any renewed efforts to take criminology public, we must ask how we ensure we influence better politics and outcomes for the future, not our past assumptions

about it. This requires not only academic reflexivity but also collective honesty about the limitations of our own knowledge. If we are uncertain about our truths, what story can we tell the public?

By raising our gaze, unlearning our received wisdom, leaning into our diversity and differences, and approaching enduring challenges with renewed curiosity and humility, we can all create a future released from our past assumptions and their overt and covert constraints. Let us not be bound by zombie tacit futures but embrace and support the emergence of our highest possibilities for a vibrant, dynamic, and just future society.

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[Justice Futures launches on 15](#) January 2025, 1-3pm GMT. To learn more, please register for the launch event at <https://justicefutureslaunch.eventbrite.com> or visit our website, www.justice-futures.com (live from 15 January 2025).
