

## Howard League Commission on Prisons

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My Lords, the Howard League for Penal Reform has provided us with a huge service. The Commission on English Prisons Today offers us detailed statistics, robust analysis and radical recommendations. In my visits to prisons, bail hostels and community sentencing programmes as bishop for prisons, I often hear people echoing what is in this report. Why, then, is this not already public policy? We know that prison has the threefold function of punishment, protection and reformation but unfortunately we allow the media focus on punishment to distort our public policy. The punitive element seems to obscure every other aspect. As this commission demonstrates, we are left with a criminal justice system that is financially wasteful, educationally ineffectual and socially negative. In other words, a better system, as proposed here, would save public money through greater and better community sentencing, reduce reoffending with local programmes on restorative justice and enhance social stability through local, strategic interventions. These are the messages that all of us concerned with community justice need to get out through the media and bring to bear on public policy.

It is extraordinary that millions of pounds can be found to build more prison places, while budgets are squeezed and purposeful activity in prison is reduced. We are putting more and more damaged people into prison regimes that are less and less restorative. That is not a recipe for a stable society, let alone a humane one. This is not about being soft on crime. It is about understanding why and how people get into crime, and why and how they get out of it.

In the faith sector, huge independent and voluntary resources are already being deployed in the rehabilitation of offenders. They would have a key role to play in the commission's proposal for local strategic partnerships. But if we look at interventions to prevent criminal behaviour, we cannot ignore the role of the family. On listening to prisoners, I am constantly struck by how much of their behaviour can be traced back to parental neglect and family dysfunction. We need bold, new initiatives that will target the hard-to-reach parents.

Like the noble Lord, Lord Carlisle, I was pleased to see that the commission had visited the community justice centre in Liverpool and had observed its success in working collaboratively across the criminal justice system in addressing criminal behaviour holistically. This is a government initiative and a government success on which they should be congratulated. However, when you ask why this approach cannot be adopted everywhere, the same issue—that of money—arises. Surely, as this commission suggests, it is profligate spending to build prisons and to incarcerate at huge public expense, when you could spend less money by diverting from prison those who could be punished and rehabilitated in other ways.

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