

It's a Crime

By Theodore Dalrymple

If anyone should wonder why traditional parties have lost their hold in some European countries, they could do worse than read David Fraser's short book *Britain, Tough on Crime?*



Gun crime concept of hand pistol showing the flag of united kingdom

It does not deal directly with the decline of traditional political parties, but rather, by recounting the way with which successive governments in Britain have dealt with the problem of crime over several decades, demonstrates that the whole politico-judicial-bureaucratic apparatus of the state has persistently ignored the interests of the public whose safety it is its primary duty to secure.

The case, however, is not an isolated one; wherever you look,

you find the same willful incompetence, combined with ever-escalating costs. Nothing succeeds like failure. Whether it be in education, social security, health care, infrastructure, border control, armed forces, etc., the whole apparatus now touches nothing that it does not cause to decay. No wonder that disenchantment is widespread and that people, no doubt naively, turn to alternatives.

Mr. Fraser's book is not scientific, or even very up-to-date (not that anything has changed much in the interval). He has simply taken headlines from newspapers about the absurd sentencing and other decisions taken by British courts in cases of violent crime, and the supposed justification or reasons for them. They would make you laugh, if they did not make you angry. His approach is anecdotal: But when anecdotes of a similar kind can be repeated many times, they cease to be merely anecdotal. Besides, both personal experience and official statistics, falsified as they often are, bear out the picture that he paints.

Some of the cases beggar belief. For example, a 17-year-old man filmed and then broadcast his premeditated attack upon his father with a knife, stabbing him several times in the neck and chest. The judge said that the fact that he filmed and broadcast the attack was chilling, as if, apart from that, the attack was perfectly all right. He sentenced the young man to two years' detention, meaning, under rules of automatic remission, he would be released in twelve months.

In 1981, a 27-year-old man killed his wife by pushing her over the ninth-floor balcony. He was out of custody in two years. In 1992, he strangled his girlfriend, but again spent only two years in custody, this time in a psychiatric hospital. In 2016, he beat his girlfriend to death with a claw hammer. Even now, he did not receive a full-life sentence, but can be released in 27 years' time. Everyone, after all, deserves another chance.

In 1981, a man was convicted of robbing and raping four women. He was sentenced to life imprisonment but was sent to an open prison in 2004. He was returned to a closed prison because of worries about his behavior, but in 2015, on the insistence of the parole board, was returned to open prison, raping a woman at knifepoint in front of her friend while he was on day release.

In July 2021, a man appeared in court for having poured gasoline over a car and setting it alight. He was a known violent criminal, with many previous convictions for violent offenses. On this occasion, his seventeen-month sentence was suspended because the judge said he was impressed by the man's "brave" decision to move completely away from where he was living, and to start a new life with his girlfriend. The judge said that he did not think for a moment that the man would come back to court; but within three months, he had murdered his girlfriend, her two daughters, and a friend of the daughters, with a claw hammer, raping the last as she lay dying.

A violent career criminal not long out of prison attacked a man in a supermarket and killed him because his criminal girlfriend had said that the man had pushed in front of her. He mistook the man and went looking for the man who had pushed in front of her. The judge said that his crime would have been bad enough if he had "got the right man"—i.e., there was a right man to get. His sentence was for four years' imprisonment, meaning that he would be out of prison in two.

And so on and so on, for 120 pages.

In 1999, the government passed a law to the effect that a burglar convicted for a third time should have a mandatory three-year prison sentence, meaning eighteen months with automatic remission. The great and the good found this to be over-punitive, but they need not have worried because half a million burglaries later, not a single burglar had been

sentenced under the provision of this “draconian” law, there being always a way for lawyers and law enforcers to evade the law. It is important to remember also that a person convicted of three burglaries has almost certainly committed at least thirty, such is the rate of detection of burglaries.

The police often refuse to record crimes, even serious ones; they minimize them for their records, or they lose all trace of their records. These are their standard tactics in their unceasing war to do as little useful work as possible. The author of the book was himself the victim of a crime that called forth efforts of almost byzantine complexity on the part of the police not to find and arrest the culprit, which would have taken about an hour at most. When I reported a minor crime to the police recently, I heard no more from them.

But where the police fail to bring a person to court, they can rely on the criminal justice system to do just as little. As this book shows, drug addiction, alcoholism, a disordered home life, all are officially used as excuses for crime.

Three days ago, in my small and generally peaceful town, I was walking up a narrow street when a young man went past me very fast. A few moments later, two men, a little older, followed him, shouting, “Oi, you! You’re threatening little children now, are you?” The first ran off and escaped.

Apparently, he had just held a knife to a small child, the son of one of the two men, and threatened him with a brick. The young man with the knife and brick had not long been expelled from school for threatening a teacher with a knife.

“Have you called the police?” I asked.

“No, there’s no point. They’ll do nothing.”

Experience suggests that they were right.

Taxes are at an all-time high and will almost certainly have

to be raised yet again. The rise of so-called populism is no mystery.

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