

# British prisons chief calls for release of two boys imprisoned for killing James Bulger

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Britain's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, has come under sustained attack following an interview in this week's *New Statesman* magazine. Ramsbotham expressed concern over the continued imprisonment of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the two boys jailed in 1993 for the killing of two-year old James Bulger in Liverpool. Thompson and Venables were just 10 years old at the time of the killing, yet they were committed for trial as adults, found guilty of premeditated murder and ordered to be detained "at her Majesty's pleasure", an open-ended sentence.

Noting that both boys were now aged 17, Ramsbotham said, "In theory, they should be moving from the hands of the social services to the prison service. Where will they go, and what will their reception be?"

The two should be "guided into life", he went on. "Once they have reached the age of adulthood [18], I would hope they would get as early as possible a release in order to give them some chance of making a life. The longer you leave it ... the less easy it will be for them. People say life shouldn't be easy for them in the light of what they did. I acknowledge that. But they did it at the age of nine [sic]. I can't remember all my emotions at that age, and I'd be horrified if I was still held accountable for them."

Ramsbotham said that he had recently met Thompson and had "formed a considerable admiration for the way he is being looked after and the way he has responded. He got a lot of exams and he is a very good artist. I saw his work, and he is someone of some talent. What are we going to do with them? I would not wish them to go to some of the institutions I have seen."

Immediately the interview was published, a vociferous campaign was instigated against the Prisons

Inspector. Conservative shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe said that the two boys' fate was not Ramsbotham's business, and that he should be given "a very hard rap over the knuckles" for intervening. The tabloid press sought the opinions of James Bulger's parents and those involved in the criminal prosecution of the two boys. Denise Fergus, James's mother, was widely quoted saying that the two had enjoyed a "quiet, comfortable time so far, living in local authority care. They should taste some real suffering." The police officer who led the murder inquiry, Detective Superintendent Albert Kirby (now retired), said: "For him to sound off at this moment and to make these comments is quite irresponsible."

As if on cue, Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw let it be known that he had sent a letter to Ramsbotham, saying that he had overstepped his remit and demanding to know why he had become involved in the case. Days later, Ramsbotham was forced to issue a humiliating apology.

The 1993 trial of Thompson and Venables marked a political sea change in Britain. Over the preceding decade, the Thatcher government had destroyed millions of jobs, gutted public services and attacked welfare benefits, creating levels of poverty and social decay unprecedented for half a century. The Tories' "law and order" campaign was an integral part of this offensive—aimed at justifying the introduction of draconian legislation and strengthening the powers of the state.

By subjecting young children to the same legal procedures as adults, the Tory government made clear that no social or moral precepts should interfere with these policies. Home Secretary Michael Howard even intervened to raise the boy's sentences from a minimum of 8 years to 15, following a petition campaign by

Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper.

The trial was particularly significant for the Labour Party, which sought to demonstrate just how irrevocably it had broken with its previous reformist nostrums. Tony Blair, then Labour spokesman for Home Affairs, outdid the Tories, using the Bulger killing to justify Labour's claim to be "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime".

Legal professionals have since said that Labour's legislation on juvenile crime represents an even more dramatic shift away from rehabilitation to retribution than the measures carried out under the Conservatives. Although the European Court of Human Rights recently ruled that Thompson and Venables were denied a fair trial, and that their sentencing was subject to political interference, Straw has so far refused to change the 15-year minimum term imposed by Howard.

Ramsbotham's interview has disturbed Labour for several reasons. In the first instance, even the mildest expression of concern about the fate of these two young people threatens to expose its own reactionary zealotry. In particular, his references to Thompson's progress conflicts with the repeated pronouncements of the police, politicians and the media that crime is the outcome of some innate "evil" and "wickedness". What is more, the Prisons Inspector made clear that his worries over Thompson and Venables were connected to broader concerns over prison policy.

The UK now locks up more people—including children—than any other country in Western Europe.

In the interview, Ramsbotham said that there were four groups of people whom he felt should not be in prison at all—the under-18s; immigration detainees and asylum-seekers, the mentally disordered and remand prisoners who have been incarcerated for more than 110 days. He also expressed concern at the use of mandatory sentencing, particularly for those with life sentences. "We do treat lifers badly. They can sit and rot in a local prison, and that is wrong", he said. "Some lifers have committed the one murder that's in them, so why not [electronically] tag them and let them out early?"

He has condemned conditions in many British prisons, denouncing Wormwood Scrubs in London for its "rottenness and evil". Of Werrington young offenders' institution, he said, nowhere "have I come

across such totally deliberate and unnecessary impoverishment of children".

Many other professionals share his concerns. The Children's Legal Centre said the two boys would be at "serious risk" in an adult prison, whilst Paul Cavadino, policy director of the National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders, said that positive work conducted with young offenders can be "undermined or even wrecked" in prison.

Ramsbotham is no liberal. Sir David is described by the *New Statesman* as a "high Tory". He was a former army general in Northern Ireland before being selected under the previous Conservative government as Prisons Inspector. Previously, he expressed his shock at finding "that prisons in this country were way behind the curve in terms of helping prisoners to get through their sentence and be released", and that he considered such an approach "a gross waste of public money".

Such criticisms place Ramsbotham beyond the pale by Labour's standards. The government's main concern is to prevent any discussion over current penal policy—particularly over precisely how society is served by a set-up that experts agree brutalises and damages its inmates still further.



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