

# The Jamie Bulger case: Release of Thompson and Venables sparks rightwing media backlash

**Barbara Slaughter****27 June 2001**

The June 22 announcement of the imminent release of Jon Thompson and Robert Venables from detention has been greeted by a hysterical campaign of vilification by the British media.

In 1993, aged just 10 years, Thompson and Venables were convicted of murdering two-year-old Jamie Bulger in Bootle, Merseyside. Press coverage at the time described the small boys as “savages” and “evil monsters”. During the eight years of their incarceration their families also became the targets for death threats, forcing them to live in hiding.

News that Thompson and Venables, now 18 years old, were to be released caused apoplexy within newspapers such as *News of the World*, *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*. In a thinly veiled attempt to mobilise lynch mobs, the press gleefully reported calls for the two to be hunted down and punished. Sunday’s *News of the World* quoted James Bulger, uncle of Jamie, stating, “Killing is too good for those two. There’s going to be no hiding place for them.” The same newspaper reported Susan Venables’ fears for the safety of her son under the headline “Bulger Killer Dead in Four Weeks”.

Because of the threat to their lives, Thompson and Venables have been released under legal rulings that grant them lifetime immunity from “exposure”, protecting their anonymity. They have been provided with the type of new identities and false life histories normally reserved for spies and gangland informers. But the secrecy order only applies in England and Wales and their identities could still be published in Scotland, the foreign press generally or on the Internet. The result is that, even though released, Thompson and Venables will be forced to live out the rest of their lives as fugitives, constantly fearing for their safety.

Within hours of the announcement, the *Manchester Evening News* published information about the two secure units where the boys were held. The Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith QC is presently considering whether to bring an injunction against the paper. Magazines all over Europe are reportedly vying with each other in offering huge sums of money to obtain recent pictures of the two young men. It is also rumoured that one of the British tabloids has a number of recent photos of both boys.

Supporters of the “Justice for Jamie” Campaign claim to have obtained a photograph of Thompson taken several years ago.

The ultimate responsibility for this monstrous situation lies with Labour and Conservative politicians, as much as it does with Britain’s venal and disgusting media. Home Secretary David Blunkett has formally condemned calls for vigilante action, whilst kowtowing to the lynch mob atmosphere. He pointed out that it was the sole responsibility of the independent Parole Board, adding, “I can well understand how distressing it is for James’ family now to hear this news.” Saturday’s issue of the *Sun* rallied to Blunkett’s side, explaining that he had to accept the release “because his hand was forced by the do-gooders in the European courts”.

The Bulger trial in 1993 was the occasion for Labour to prove the extent to which it had abandoned all notions of progressive social reform and could match the Tories in anti-crime rhetoric. As Labour spokesman for Home Affairs, Tony Blair called for harsher measures against children, thus positioning Labour as the party of “law and order” and himself as its future leader. As 10-year-old children, Thompson and Venables were deemed to be criminally responsible. They were tried in an open Crown Court, during proceedings that they could neither follow nor understand. Until this trial, it had been customary to deal with cases involving killings by young children in a manner which protected them from publicity. However, trial judge Justice Morland allowed the publication of photos of Thompson and Venables and their personal details on the spurious grounds of public interest. It is this decision, above all, which is responsible for the dangers they and their families face today.

No effort was made to understand the social and psychological pressures that led to the boys’ offense and no effort was spared in seeking to portray them as inherently evil. One policeman involved in the case was widely reported as saying, “I believe nature spouts out freaks. These two boys were freaks who just found each other.”

Following the guilty verdict, a petition drive was organised by the *Sun*, Rupert Murdoch’s right-wing tabloid, which provided a pretext for the minimum tariff of eight years set by Justice Morland to be raised to 10 years by the Lord Chief

Justice Lord Taylor and then to 15 years by Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard on the grounds of “public outrage”.

Labour would never have reversed this attack on democratic rights or the continued brutalisation of two damaged boys. Howard’s ruling was overturned two years later by the Law Lords, after a series of challenges to the original verdict by lawyers for the two children. In December 1999 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Thompson and Venables had not received a fair trial. They also ruled that the fixing of their sentences by a politician rather than by an independent judicial body was a breach of their human rights.

It was these legal rulings by the European Court of Human Rights that made it necessary to release the young men this week. Last October the Lord Chief Justice Lord Woolf effectively ended the boys’ tariff—the minimum period they must spend in custody. He ruled it would not benefit the boys to spend time in the “corrosive atmosphere” of young offenders’ institutions.

Contrary to media lies, Thompson and Venables’ release has been subject to rigorous assessment procedures. Both separately underwent several hours of questioning by the Parole Board, to ascertain whether they posed a “danger to the public”. Both young men were declared by those responsible for their care as extremely mature and caring young men who are filled with deep regret and remorse.

But even after having served their sentence, Thompson and Venables’ nightmare will never really end. Aside from the ever-present possibility of death at the hands of a vigilante, they have been released under “life licenses”. Someone close to the case was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying, “They are Government property and they will remain Government property... That is what being detained at her Majesty’s pleasure means. They can be returned to prison any time it pleases her Majesty’s government. They are not free men, they never will be free men. They are just on a longer leash than before.”

This is tragedy enough, but the impact of the rightwing campaign set in motion by the Tories and nurtured by the media and the Labour government will continue to have a much wider impact.

The essential aim of the efforts made to demonize Thompson and Venables was in order to forward an agenda for the destruction of social reforms. To justify this, it was necessary to repudiate any attempt to understand the broader social, economic and cultural processes that could give rise to aberrant behaviour by children or any other societal problem. Any attempt to do so was rubbished as an expression of “wet liberal do-gooding” and blamed for rising lawlessness. Public discourse was brutalised in anticipation of the further brutalisation of society itself.

At the time of the trial Venables was described as a child who was almost illiterate and who would regularly bang his head on walls or slash himself with scissors. Since then he has achieved

six GCSEs, has just taken his A-levels and is expected to take an external university course possibly leading to university. Thompson has gained five GCSEs, has also taken his A-level exams and demonstrated a real talent for art.

In February a consultant adolescent forensic psychiatrist, accustomed to working with child murderers, said of Venables, “He has made exceptional progress... with personal development, acknowledgement of the enormity of his offence, understanding of his actions as a child and his ‘normal’ adolescent development in abnormal circumstances.” A similar report was made about Thompson, praising his “exceptional progress... with regard to maturity, education and insight gained in therapy. Robert accepts responsibility for the grave acts he committed in the offence and shows great remorse for the pain and suffering he caused.”

The progress made by both young men is a tribute to the humane treatment from the professionals whose care they were under. Rather than being seen as a striking success, however, the treatment of Thompson and Venables is denounced by the media as a waste of public money and the work of the “liberal elite” who are sending out the message that crime pays.

Since the 1993 trial, juvenile law has been subject to even greater attack by both Conservative and Labour governments. Children have lost their right to remain silent, they can be placed under curfew and held responsible for “anti-social behaviour” from the age of nine. More and more children are now placed in adult prisons—something which is actually illegal, but is increasingly disregarded as more young people are thrown into prison. Now Blunkett has vowed to change the law to reinstitute the right of politicians to determine the length of sentence for young offenders.

The imprisonment of Thompson and Venables was thus the focus of a concerted drive to turn back the clock and return to Victorian values—the impossibility of rehabilitation, of culpability from an early age, of vicious retribution. Their forced parole is viewed by the British ruling class as a setback and an affront. In contrast, all those concerned with democratic principles and the social fate of the most vulnerable members of society must welcome the boys’ release and set themselves consciously in opposition to the howls of the right wing media and political establishment.



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