

Britain: Mother faces prison for failing to send daughters to school

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22 May 2002

Patricia Amos, a 43-year-old divorced mother of five, became the first person in Britain to be imprisoned for failing to send her two daughters aged 13 and 15 years to school. Amos was sentenced to 60 days imprisonment in Holloway jail and refused bail last week, pending an appeal today. Amos was so unprepared for her sentencing at Oxford Crown Court that she had to call an elder daughter, who has three children of her own, from the prison to ask her to look after the two younger daughters, Emma and Jackie.

The government welcomed Amos's imprisonment under legislation that came into force last year as part of an addition to the 1996 Education Act. Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education and Skills (DfES), said, "It's unfortunate that it got to this point, but if it's a sign that magistrates are taking tackling truancy seriously then I welcome that."

The leader of Oxfordshire County Council, which brought the action, Keith Mitchell, said, "The positive lesson from this is that I understand that these children have now realised the importance of going to school and are attending again. It has been a tough lesson but let's hope it sends out a clear message to all other youngsters who are tempted to play truant."

The sentencing of this mother of five is only the latest grotesque expression of the increasing resort by the Labour government to punitive measures in response to complex social problems for which they have no policies to overcome.

Before May 2001 parents could be prosecuted under Section 444 of the Education Act, which carried a maximum penalty of £1,000 per child. Subsequent changes increased the maximum to £2,500 and/or three months imprisonment. The act applies when a parent knows their child is absent from school but their truancy continues.

To reinforce this punitive approach, the government

recently announced that full-time, uniformed police officers are to be permanently based in up to 400 schools in England's worst "crime hotspots" in order to reduce truancy and crime. In addition increased use of electronic registration is to be used to monitor absence, as well as a four-fold increase in the number of truancy sweeps to take children back to school.

As if to compound problems for parents and families who are already clearly struggling to cope in difficult circumstances, Home Secretary David Blunkett proposed last month that the child benefit paid to families whose children commit crime or play truant be cut.

Each announcement of juvenile policy whether from Blunkett, Morris or Prime Minister Blair could have come straight from the pages of Charles Dickens *Hard Times*. Rather than society as a whole and the government in particular bearing any responsibility for the plight of children, and their educational development, policy makers simply insist, "Parents have a duty to make sure they are doing all that they can to instil discipline in their children."

The same day that Morris and company welcomed the sentencing of Amos, Martin Narey, director general of the prison service, told an audience at Downing Street that the system was "bursting at the seams". He said whilst imprisonment could help serious offenders, short term offenders such as Amos were overwhelming the system due to the ministers reinterpreting breaches of the civil law as a criminal offence.

There has been a concerted campaign in the media to justify Amos's imprisonment by portraying her as an unfit mother, who ignored repeated warnings to clamp down on truancy. But the picture that emerges only points to the utter futility of a perspective of combating social problems by punishing the individuals concerned.

Amos's family said the girls became reluctant to go to school after the death of their grandmother, who lived

with them. The *Daily Mirror* newspaper then revealed that Amos is a heroin addict, who needed her daughters to care for her following her mother's death.

Three ex-addicts who are said to have supplied and shared heroin with Amos, have signed legal undertakings to give evidence in court if necessary to back up the *Mirror's* claims of Amos's addiction and lifestyle that went with it. They describe in detail how the two girls regularly were party to heroin deals and assisted their mother in the preparation of the drug before injection. Their grandmother could offer them some protection and stability, which enabled the girls to attend school, albeit infrequently. But once she died, the girls and their mother's world fell apart. Her lawyer has said that Amos is suffering from a long-term illness, but has refused to specify what this is. Since she has been in custody, she has spent time in medical facilities.

By incarcerating Amos, rather than addressing the problem of drug dependency and deprivation, the government and the legal system has intensified the emotional upheaval that the family has already suffered. A mother who is already in crisis has been separated from her children. Terrified that they will lose their mother, the two girls have promised to attend school if she is released—it is this which Oxfordshire County Council leader Keith Mitchell has described as a “positive lesson”.

The BBC reported that a charity involved with women in prison, who spoke to Amos, discovered that one of the reasons the girls were not turning up was that they had no suitable shoes and were embarrassed to go to school. Banbury is a relatively well-off area and the pressures to conform would be tremendous.

To make matters worse, the girls and their family have been treated to the usual sensationalist reporting by the media—always keen to describe children as being out-of-control and parents from socially deprived circumstances as feckless and irresponsible.

Another factor ignored by the government is the alienation of many children from the school system created by Labour's own educational policies. Surveys show that half of all secondary school children are bored and fail to see the relevance of much of what they learn to their own lives. Rather than engaging children and stimulating their intellectual growth, schooling has become ever more regimented and proscriptive. With a minimum of 75 tests between the ages of 5 and 16, the current generation faces more exams and tests than ever before. Alongside the obsession with test results goes an insistence on discipline and harsh punishment of bad

behaviour. This can make or break schools, due to a funding formula that is based on the numbers on a school roll. Overall this creates an environment that discourages children with problems from attending school, while alternative facilities specifically geared up to children such as the Amos girls have been closed down.

Earlier this year, for example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a report focusing on the experiences and specific needs of girls in relation to their disaffection with education. The report noted, “Girls' needs and difficulties are often less visible and more likely to be overlooked than those of their male classmates... Internalised responses such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and self-harming behaviour can be overlooked or assumed to relate to problems beyond, rather than within, school. Physical and emotional withdrawal is also less likely to be responded to immediately.”

It is estimated that one in five children suffer some kind of mental ill health, but they only receive two percent of the mental health budget. Therapy offered by Child and Families Mental Health teams is in such demand that most families who require their support have to wait for up to two years to be assessed.

Instead of addressing any of these issues, or broader societal problems, Labour simply demands stiffer punishments against those who fail to meet up to accepted norms of behaviour—supposedly as the most effective means of encouraging greater personal responsibility. Meanwhile over 50,000 children truant from school every single day. The government should be asked: How many parents are supposed to be imprisoned in order to tackle this problem?



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