

Britain's media proclaims the virtues of imprisoning parents

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“Prison works” was the message from Britain’s Labour government and a supportive media, after the recent jailing of mother of five, Patricia Amos, for failing to send her two daughters to school.

Following the conviction of Amos, her two daughters Emma, 15 and Jackie, 13, began attending school and begged for their mother to be freed. Amos was released after successfully appealing her original sentence of 60 days. Her sentence was reduced to 28 days and she was allowed to leave prison after serving half that term.

Judge Peter Crawford QC, who heard the appeal with two magistrates, told Amos that if her daughters stopped attending school, she might find herself in court again.

Following her release, Amos gave various interviews to say that it had been right to send her to prison, she had learned her lesson and the girls would continue to attend school. The two girls, and their older sister who looked after them whilst their mother was incarcerated, also spoke out about how prison had made their mother face up to her problems.

A chorus of self-congratulation was struck up, with government spokesmen, trade union leaders and newspapers ecstatic about this victory for the tough law-and-order approach to social problems they had long been advocating.

Estelle Morris, secretary of state for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), hailed the Amos case as the way forward in similar circumstances. David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), said that anecdotal evidence from a number of schools showed that the action taken against Amos had brought instant results. Schools across the country reported the reappearance of truants with parents admitting that they were acting out of fear of being imprisoned. A head teacher in London said

that he had used the case to threaten a parent.

Writing in the nominally liberal *Independent*, David Aaronovitch penned the most venomous piece on Amos. Calling on the government and the authorities to “Show no mercy to feckless parents”, he fulminated, “my liberalism stopped just outside Patricia Amos.... Though I feel like one of those voices of outrage in the middle-ranking tabloids for saying so, I was rather glad that so public a line had been drawn in the social sand.”

The appeal court had heard how Amos’s 63-year-old mother was found dead by the two girl’s two years ago and that this had had a devastating effect on the family. The grandmother had ensured the girls attended school, while Amos was battling a heroin addiction and ill health, culminating in the loss of a kidney. A letter to the court from Jennifer Wolfendene, a bereavement counsellor at Holloway Prison, said: “The extreme distress experienced by this family after this woman’s death became pathological.”

After reviewing Amos’s difficult life, Aaronovitch responded by attacking her for not being able to cope, “you cannot give birth to five kids and then seek to duck your responsibility for their welfare. If this sounds tough, well it is. It’s also realistic,” he said.

Aaronovitch could hardly contain his spleen. After attacking Amos for failing to ensure her children attended school, he berated those parents who oppose their “miscreants” exclusion from school.

The *Daily Telegraph*, mouthpiece of the Conservative Party, also hailed what it dubbed the “Amos effect” as a “dramatic demonstration of the necessity and efficacy of sanctions, including prison as a last resort.”

After pointing out that “the present Government has been harsher than the system satirised by Dickens,” the *Telegraph* asked, “whether the Conservatives would have got away with it.” After this backhanded praise

for Labour, the paper concluded, “broad acceptance of the necessity for measures to deal with truants is essential.” The editor’s sole complaint was that it was only Mrs Amos who could be imprisoned under legislation introduced by Labour, rather than her children: “A mother went to prison because the rights of children are now so inflated that no successful sanctions can any longer be taken against them.”

The *Telegraph* is correct in only one respect: since coming to power five years ago, Labour has not merely continued with Thatcherite social policies but has done things that the hated Tory government could not have gotten away with. It has been aided in this task by the rightward lurch of Britain’s former liberal intelligentsia, of which Aaronovitch is a prime specimen, and who constitute the social base of support for Prime Minister Blair’s government.

The political nostrums that Labour once championed and which underlay the welfare state—the possibility of building a mixed (public-private) economy as the foundation for a more compassionate and egalitarian society—have been junked in favour of punitive measures.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Labour’s attitude towards children. Contrary to the *Telegraph*’s complaint that children can no longer be imprisoned, in 1993, 4,200 children were sentenced to immediate custody. By 1999 this had risen to 7,000—an increase of 67 percent. The length of sentences handed out to children has increased from an average of 8.6 months in 1993 to 11.4 months in 1999. The government recently announced that hundreds of children currently on bail pending trial would be remanded in custody in future. More than £6 million a month is to be spent on creating “secure cells” for children, and certain prisons or prison wings are to be designated for under-18s.

While the government is intent on clamping down on truancy, it is preventing other children from attending school with equal vigour. Aaronovitch’s attack on parents who defend their “miscreant” offspring was made in reference to the government announcing that permanent exclusions from primary and secondary schools have increased by 11 percent. In 2000/2001, there were 9,210 exclusions, a rise from 8,323 in the previous year. The highest increase in exclusions was in primary schools, where children banned from schools rose by 19 percent. Days before the figures

were announced, a head teacher at a primary school in Newcastle permanently excluded 12 pupils in one go.

The government had previously pledged to reduce the number of school exclusions, but now Morris was said to be “relaxed” about the increase.

Not only is support for parents lacking, but many of those who work in front line services for children are also bearing the brunt of the lack of social and psychological provision. In England, for example, one in 11 educational psychologist posts is vacant while some authorities have more than a third of positions unfilled. Brian Harrison-Jennings, general secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists, said, “Initiatives to tackle bullying and truancy are being forced on to the back-burner because we do not have time for them.”

While Labour sets out to be “tough on truancy and bad behaviour”, it all but ignores what its by now hackneyed jargon would designate as “the causes of truancy and bad behaviour”. Instead it has become the advocate of the “short, sharp shock” approach pioneered by its Conservative predecessors—in the belief that terrorising parents will in turn lead to them forcing their children into doing as they are told. Whether or not there is any truth in media reports of an “Amos effect”, the long-term impact of such an approach will brutalise society in general and a generation of children in particular. It will help create untold suffering within families, many of which are already on the verge of complete breakdown.



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