

Britain: Reimprisonment of Jon Venables sparks right-wing media campaign

Paul Bond
13 March 2010

Once again the tragic death of toddler Jamie Bulger in 1993 has provided an opportunity for the media to launch a hysterical law and order campaign, demanding revenge and “victim’s justice”. It is a demand that has found a sympathetic hearing within the government.

Reports were leaked that Jon Venables, convicted along with Robert Thompson of the killing of the two-year old, has been returned to prison following an alleged breach of his licence. Thompson and Venables were just ten years of age at the time of Jamie’s killing.

The killing of Jamie Bulger was used by the Labour Party, and its then shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair, to prove itself even more right-wing on law and order than the Conservatives. Such was the hysteria whipped up as part of this, that Venables and Thompson—who had been publicly identified at the time of their trial—had to be given false identities on their eventual release from detention.

Now, once again, a frenzy accompanied news of Venables recall. The media published one unsubstantiated allegation after another—a fight at work, sexual assault, and viewing child pornography—was advanced by the tabloid press such as *The Sun*, *The News of the World* and *The Daily Mirror*. The *Daily Mail* lumped Venables in with serial sex offender Peter Chapman in an article headlined, “The sorry truth is that many sex offenders CAN’T be rehabilitated.”

The demand went up for the government to disclose why Venables had been returned to prison, in defiance of legal precedent, and for his new identity to be revealed. Labour Home Secretary Alan Johnson jumped on the bandwagon, proclaiming that the public had a “right to know.”

Significantly, the *Mail* was forced to admit that the press was unable to solicit widespread popular support for its demands. But it was not long before the vigilantism implicit in these demands found expression. Former prisoner David Calvert had been mistakenly identified as Venables and was driven from his home as a result of death threats. He told the press that he lived “in constant fear that someone will kill me and my family.” The police have now issued a statement that Calvert is not Venables.

Calvert was recruited by the media to issue his own demand that Justice Secretary Jack Straw reveal Venables’ new identity.

Straw was reluctantly forced to make a statement opposing disclosure, but only while stressing that this might jeopardise any future conviction. This provoked overt hostilities between the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office. A Home Office source told Sue Cameron of the *Financial Times* that some Ministry of Justice people were “Like wet rags.”

In any event Johnson’s intervention made clear that there is no expectation that Venables should be treated with any of the legal reserve normally afforded in difficult cases. For all that their anonymity is protected by law there have been few qualms about leaking information and stories about Venables and Thompson.

A former social worker has this week spoken at great length to the *Daily Mail*, disclosing details of Thompson’s time in a detention centre. It is suspected that police or prison officers were responsible for leaking the information that Venables had been recalled.

The media campaign makes it increasingly unlikely that Venables will be able to maintain the new identity he was forced to adopt on his release in 2001. His recall makes it all but certain that other prisoners will be able to identify him. Prison officers are concerned at the likelihood of an attack by other prisoners in this eventuality. Reports suggest that Venables’ psychological health is deteriorating.

It is understandable that Jamie’s father Ralph, and Bulger’s mother, Denise Fergus, should find these events distressing. But this only makes more revolting the efforts by the media to utilise them in an effort to whip up hysteria and sell more copies. The fact remains that neither parent has a right to know the reasons for Venables’ recall, let alone his assumed identity. It would be prejudicial, and serve only to foment a lynch-mob atmosphere. This fact was in the end stressed by Baroness Butler-Sloss, the judge who granted anonymity to the two boys on their release from prison. Butler-Sloss, a crossbench peer and former president

of the high court's family division, warned of “the enormous importance of protecting his anonymity now, and if he is [again] released, because those who wanted to kill him in 2001 are likely to be out there now.”

That such demands are nevertheless being championed by today's Home Secretary Alan Johnson, while Conservative leader David Cameron calls for Denise Fergus to be given “a lot of information” on Venables, is the inevitable outcome of the legal travesty 17 years ago.

Notwithstanding the UK's extremely low age of criminal responsibility—10 in England and Wales, 8 in Scotland—the decision to try Thompson and Venables as adults in the full glare of the media, was unprecedented.

The floor of the dock had to be raised so they could see over it. Both boys were bewildered and frightened, crying and fidgeting. Neither was able to give evidence and it is questionable how much of the proceedings they were able to follow or understand. A lynch mob gathered outside the court daily, baying for their blood.

Nonetheless, at the end of the trial, Lord Justice Morland lifted all reporting restrictions on identifying the two boys and publishing details of their backgrounds, claiming that “the public interest overrode the interest of the defendants.”

It must be added that the court did not allow evidence to be presented of the social deprivation both boys had endured. Thompson's mother was an alcoholic. His father, who had left the family five years before, was also a heavy drinker who beat his wife and children. The older children regularly beat the younger, like Robert. Venables also had a troubled family history. His mother suffered psychiatric problems, and his siblings had educational difficulties. Following the separation of his parents, Venables had shown severely disturbed behaviour, slashing himself with scissors and banging his head on walls. He was described as being almost illiterate at the time of the trial.

Venables and Thompson were convicted of murder, and sentenced to eight years in a secure unit. This was then raised to 10 years by the then Lord Chief Justice. In July 1994 Tory Home Secretary Michael Howard raised their tariff again, to 15 years. This political interference in the case raised concerns. The House of Lords overturned Howard's decision in 1997, but without deciding on what the tariff should be.

When Labour came to power in 1997, it continued to use the case to press forward its reactionary social agenda. When the then Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham called in 1999 for as early a release as possible for the boys when they reached 18, he was publicly rebuked by then Home Secretary Jack Straw and forced to issue an apology.

In 1999 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the boys had not received a fair trial and condemned the

fixing of their sentence by politicians, rather than the judiciary. Although forced to appoint a review by Lord Justice Woolf, the government stood by its policies. Straw told MPs the boys would not be released early, and rejected any suggestion that the law relating to juvenile trials for serious crimes might be changed.

When Woolf dissolved their tariff in 2000, the way was cleared for their release the following year. The new Home Secretary David Blunkett distanced himself from the decision to release the youths, which was taken by the Parole Board alone, and expressed his intention to reinstitute the right of politicians to determine length of sentence for young offenders. Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* defended Blunkett against “the do-gooders in the European courts.”

Venables' psychiatric report for the Parole Board called for his release from juvenile custody rather than being moved into prison, where exposure to drug-taking and criminals would be a “major setback” to his development. But official attitudes were summed up by someone close to the case, who told the *Daily Telegraph* that they “are ... and ... will remain Government property.” Under their life licence, “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.”

Because of the decision to identify the two, Thompson and Venables had to assume new identities on their release. The court issued legal rulings to preserve their anonymity, although these only applied in England and Wales. Both young men faced the likelihood of having to live on the run, fearing for their safety from vigilantes, as David Calvert's experience has confirmed. Psychological pressure to self-disclose identity is a recognised phenomenon in such cases. Mary Bell, one of only three other people currently living under such an anonymity order in Britain, had also revealed her identity.

Once again, the Thompson and Venables case underscores that the real threat to the public comes from a government, political establishment and media that is hostile to democratic rights and the rule of law.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact