

FACING UP TO HARSH REALITY



THERE were two important lessons I was taught during the General Election campaign. The first was that the public were far more concerned about crime than about any other issue ... apart from dog muck. The second was that the political parties were much more comfortable talking about dog muck (or anything else) than in coming up with anything that made sense as a policy for tackling crime. Eight months on, nothing has Changed. But one thing I am certain of is that we will find no useful answers in the current bout of Labour and Conservative battling to be first to say the same thing. We have to be willing to get into a deeper debate - a debate which will make a lot of us very uncomfortable.

This has nothing to do with being 'soft on crime'. It starts from an assumption that a society has the right to feel safe with itself; the right to be protected from those who brutalise, maim and murder. But we have to face the hard realities of our current failures and where we are now.

Prison may take people off the streets for a while. The trouble is that they come back worse. All the evidence is there. Prison is a really expensive way of making disturbed people bad, and bad people worse.

maim their offenders find the same patterns repeated in the society itself. We may have to accept that there are some people, so deeply disturbed and brutal, that they have to be locked away, forever. But what about the rest, the overwhelming majority of offenders in the criminal justice system?

In this sense, John Major could not have been more wrong. How can he talk of stopping understanding the criminal when he has never even started; never grasped at the root causes of crime, never looked at the part that he (and you and I) have played in making this worse.

I wish I had had him with me this week, to see the preview launch of Alan Bleasdale's play *On the Ledge* at the Nottingham Playhouse. It is not only a tribute to the city that it should risk putting on a new work which is as bold as it is controversial, as wildly funny as it is desperately sad. But I wanted John Major there with me to feel the anger, the frustration, the greed and brutality, the hopelessness and despair that runs through the play and permeates the crime it depicts. For the play's anger is also my own; the characters in it have walked through my life as much as across the Playhouse's set. If I want to tackle crime (and I do) then I have to begin from this sort of reality.

Just over 20 years ago I was commissioned through the Home Office to set up the country's first community service by offenders scheme. It was a move to break the cycles of criminality, getting people to work in the community rather than putting them into prison's 'schools for scoundrels'. It was a scheme which worked, a little, but failed to deliver all that it should have, because the system settled for

playing safe and saving money rather than a massive challenge to criminality. But this might not be a bad place to go back to.

Such a challenge today would need a different framework, one which really took on board a 'victim reparation' scheme which delivered intensive work and skill training to those it 'took out' of circulation; which guaranteed a way back into society for those who are currently our biggest pains in the backside; which worked intensively with children and young people on the margins of criminality that surround us.

All this will cost money. In the long run we will save from it but in the short run there is no solution worth pursuing that is cheap or free.

IT would only work as part of a package that brought hope and jobs, houses and education and pathways out of poverty, back to our towns and cities. I wish I could get John Major to talk to some of the young people I know whose lives are enmeshed in crime. He might be horrified to discover how much they are 'Thatcher's children' - the products of a 'me-first' generation, where life is about what you consume, not who you are, where the question is what you can get not how you get it, where there is no such thing as community ... only number one. Until then, I might start by taking him (and other MPs) to see the Bleasdale play when Nottingham hands it on to London.