



The Sixth Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture

Beyond the Causes of Crime

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“TOUGH ON CRIME, TOUGH ON THE CAUSES OF CRIME”

WITH THESE WORDS, Tony Blair moved Labour ahead on the issue of law and order. It was, perhaps, the single most effective sound bite of recent times. And yet, for all their brilliance, those nine words sum up much that is wrong with the established approach to crime.

There is always a choice

What did the Prime Minister mean by the ‘causes’ of crime? He meant the social circumstances of the criminal – as if a child born into a particular home, in a particular street, in a particular town is condemned to a life of crime. But there is nothing inevitable about crime. There is always a choice. Even after the first offence there is a choice. Even after a thousand offences there is choice.

To call social circumstance the ‘cause’ of crime is to deny the autonomy which is the centrepiece of our humanity and to adopt instead the mechanistic conception of society that Keith Joseph, in whose honour we come together today, struggled so hard to combat. Before we can begin to think rationally about crime, we must acknowledge the capacity of every individual for autonomous choice. We must acknowledge, in other words, that each individual has a personal history, of which each is as much the author as the subject.

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The conveyor belt

But, in acknowledging this, we must recognise also that liberal individualism is not the same thing as social atomism, and that individuals are affected by what they learn from the society in which they grow up and subsist. The Kantian half of the truth about virtue and vice is that they are chosen; the Aristotelian half of the truth about virtue and vice is that they are learned. The reality for children born into a certain kind of home is that the temptations are stronger and the sources of moral instruction more distant. Each one of us has a choice – but, for some, the help needed to acquire virtuous habits is less present.

An image that springs to mind in describing the personal history of the law-breaker is that of a conveyor belt on which the individual passes through successive stages: neglected or abused child, disruptive pupil, anti-social teenager, young offender, first-time prisoner, repeat offender, hardened criminal. At each stage, the individual has the option of stepping off the conveyor belt. But it cannot be expected that this choice will be made unless society finds ways of providing for the individual not only easily accessible exit points off the conveyer belt to crime, but also a hand helping him to take those exits.

And yet in tens-of-thousands of cases the authorities appear powerless to make this happen. Powerless, that is, until the terminal stage when the crimes committed are serious. Then the state steps in and removes the criminal from the conveyor belt by long terms of imprisonment.

This was the common sense point that Michael Howard was making when he said that 'prison works'. By giving courts greater powers to lock up persistent criminals, he was the first man in his position to hold back the tide of crime.

He saw the need to stop the conveyor belt of crime. His achievement was to do so at its terminal point, the point at which prison works. But what do we do before that point?

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The conveyor belt rolls on

Let us examine the failures stage by stage. The fight against crime starts in the family. We rely on parents to teach their children the difference between right and wrong through all the subtle arts affection is heir to: persuasion, example, emulation, gentle attrition. Yet, all too often, the supportive network of family and friends, on which such moral education depends, is absent – its place taken by the gang, which provides, in a perverted form, the fraternity missing at home.

Then to school. In a good school, the orderliness of its proceedings, combined with the evident interest of its teachers in the moral and academic advancement of the pupils, reinforces the support and direction of a good home and may even make up for the absence of such familial support and direction. But, in a school where order has broken down, or is sustained only superficially, the gang is likely to exercise the same baleful influence that it has already established in its role as a substitute family outside school.

Encouraged by the *mores* of the gang to engage in minor acts of mischief or worse, the young person – usually the young man – comes into contact with the criminal justice system. What does he learn then? All too often it is that the authorities are impotent, that anti-social behaviour is tolerated and that minor crimes are rarely punished.

And *if* he moves on to more serious crimes and *if* these are detected and *if* these are brought to court and *if* these are convicted, what does he learn at that stage? That punishment is weak and ineffectual, with no element of reparation to the victim and no expectation that the perpetrator should even apologise for the harm that he has done to others.

But if, finally, he finds himself in prison, what does he learn from this hardest of lessons? As I have said, prison works. But in many cases the respite for society, provided by removing the persistent offender, is temporary. The offender is released, unreformed, into a destructive cycle of re-offending and re-imprisonment.

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Families, schools, the courts, the police, the probation service and the prisons: each should present a series of diversions from the path to crime. But instead, for all too many, the conveyor belt rolls on, pushing and pulling young people from one stage of desolation to the next.

Misunderstanding the choice, asking the wrong questions

Why have we failed? If this were an easy question with easy answers, we would have found the answers long ago. We cannot hope for some single illumination which will, by itself, show the way to a crime-free society. But the very difficulty may indicate at least one helpful line of enquiry. May we have been asking the wrong questions? All our questions focus on crime: What is the attraction of crime? What makes young people choose crime? What are the causes of crime? May these questions be misdirecting our thoughts?

This is what Michael Novak intended to suggest when he said:

People often ask what causes crime. But they're asking the wrong question. Let me give a parallel from economics. If you ask, "what are the causes of poverty?" you are asking a really useless question. Suppose you discover the answer? Terrific! Now you know how to make poverty... The interesting question, the fruitful question, is quite different. And it didn't occur to anybody to ask this other question until late in the eighteenth century: "What are the causes of the wealth of nations?" If you can figure that out, then you can begin to imagine a time of universal prosperity, in which there will be no more poverty and in which a firm, general base can be put under the feet of every man and woman on earth. That was the dream of Adam Smith. He looked for the systemic, social causes that would bring about the creation of *new* wealth, not to take existing wealth from others and redistribute it.¹

¹ Michael Novak in an address given to a conference hosted by the Justice Fellowship, Washington DC, 31 January 1994.

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We need to ask the “fruitful question” about crime, just as Adam Smith did about poverty. His insight seems obvious to us; of course it is better to inquire after the causes of wealth than of poverty. However, as Novak reminds us, it is an insight that had eluded politicians before Smith’s time; and, for that matter, many of those after.

We are indebted to Keith Joseph for repeating Smith’s great question in our time. What seems obvious to us today was not, just three decades ago. And it is because of the *answers* that he and his colleagues provided that the fortunes of our nation and of the Conservative Party were transformed. Now, at the start of this century, I believe we stand on the brink of an opportunity of equal significance.

We won in 1979 because we found new solutions to an old problem, that of economic decline. The next 18 years brought unparalleled prosperity to our nation. But prosperity is not enough. The days when governments could rest on their economic laurels are gone. The voters understand that it is *they* who create the wealth and the state that consumes it. In return, they expect a better quality of life. Living standards may rise, but that counts for little while the taste of economic success is soured by continuing social failure. And there is no stronger evidence of such failure than the persistence of crime and incivility in the midst of prosperity.

The opposite of crime: the neighbourly society

That is why the Prime Minister’s famous words on the causes of crime found such resonance. But Michael Novak reminds us that they miss the point completely. Just as Keith Joseph sought not the causes of poverty, but of its opposite, so we must seek not the causes of crime, but of *its* opposite.

What is the opposite of crime? Some would say ‘order’, but that is no more than the absence of crime while what we seek is something that is in active opposition to it. Crime is a destructive force; its opposite must be a constructive force. In modern English

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idiom, this constructive force goes unnamed. It is a symptom, and perhaps to a slight degree a cause, of the failure of our society to overcome crime that we have no word for its opposite.

This is not true of all languages and cultures. There is, for example, the Hebrew word *shalom*. The inadequate English translation is 'peace', but *shalom* signifies much more than the absence of conflict. The true meaning is more akin to 'the wholeness of community', the totality of right relationships within communities, between persons and families and social groups, between man and his environment. *Shalom* has an obvious affinity with the Arabic *salaam*, also crudely translated as peace, and with the Greek *eirene* which again signifies much more than the absence of conflict. This enlarged concept of peace found its supreme Christian expression in Augustine's classic exposition of the kaleidoscopic varieties of moral and social peace:

The peace of mankind, an ordered concord; the peace of the household, an ordered concord of ruling and obeying amongst the members of the household; the peace of the state, an ordered concord of ruling and obeying amongst the citizens.²

The same sense is preserved in that ancient English form of words: "the peace and tranquillity of the realm". Until a very few years ago, these words formed part of the prayer that opened every sitting of Parliament, when MPs would pray for:

...the maintenance of true Religion and Justice, the safety, honour and happiness of the Queen, the publick wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same...

In 1998, the old prayer was discarded. However, its key phrase still resonates to this day. In June last year, Ann Widdecombe held a press conference in one of London's poorest housing estates. These are her words:

² *City of God*, Book 13.

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On estates like this all over the country, live huge numbers of people whom I have called the forgotten decent. They are people like us but with only a fraction of our resources and all they want to do is live normally, but instead their lives are made a daily hell by drugs, thuggery, intimidation and degradation of the environment.

Physical regeneration is necessary, but on its own insufficient. I am often accused of being old-fashioned so let me use an old-fashioned phrase: the peace and tranquillity of the realm. Where are peace and tranquillity for the people who live here?³

Where indeed? But it is not enough for Conservatives to have the right instincts, we must formulate them in a contemporary idiom. That is why we must coin our own term for what the Hebrews meant by *shalom*, Islamic culture by *salaam*, the New Testament Christians by *eirene* and our predecessors by the peace and tranquillity of the realm. The term I will use is *the neighbourly society*.

³ Ann Widdecombe, Arden housing estate, Hackney, 18 June 2001.

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THE CHOICE BEFORE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE is between crime and participation in the neighbourly society. It is this participation that keeps our young people off the conveyor belt to criminality or gets them off if their earlier choices were destructive ones. That is why we must seek not the causes of crime, but the causes of the neighbourly society.

Lest imagining the opposite of crime may seem an exercise in the intangible, let us imagine instead the opposite of a criminal. What are the images that form in the mind? Of someone who gives instead of takes, who earns instead of steals, who creates instead of destroys, who welcomes instead of abuses, who persuades instead of threatens.

These contrasts are relational, because the neighbourly society is first and foremost about the establishment and preservation of right relationships amongst persons. These relationships are not part of the world of natural science; they are man-made; neighbourliness is something that each of us has to learn and, in learning, helps to establish. This activity of learning and creating takes place throughout our lives, but especially in childhood and adolescence. Nor is neighbourliness something that we learn on our own, but rather in relationship to others – most of all from within our families, but also, as we grow up, from within the wider community.

I should make clear that by 'community' I mean much more than a street, or housing estate or some other category of neighbourhood. By 'community' I mean a series of relationships, descending from the nation to the family – interlocking networks

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of relationships that turn collections of people, places and artefacts into living wholes. Aspects of community are to be found in every example of friendship and mutual recognition – in the residents' association and the local football team, in the everyday interactions of good neighbours, in the gossip of villagers who know each others faces and histories.

The relationships that form communities also form and sustain individuals. The family is, of course, the greatest influence on a child's development – but families depend upon the nourishment and sustenance of the wider community, as we are horribly reminded by the way in which families are torn apart by tyranny and anarchy. Nor do individuals subsist solely within their families; we draw, inevitably, on the wider community for our models of neighbourliness, our understanding of right relationships between friends, between different generations, different ethnic groups, students and teachers, employees and employers, citizens and the authorities. Only strong communities can provide the initiation into these relationships; and only these strong relationships can foster strong communities. This is the virtuous cycle of social responsibility: the neighbourly society inducts the individual into the community and the community sustains the neighbourly society. To put it in more traditional terms, one generation conveys by intimation and emulation to the next the indescribably complex and subtle requirements of social tranquillity in a given setting.

Community depends on security

Without security and tranquillity, this act of transmission becomes perilously difficult. In a hostile environment, neighbours don't stop to say hello, old people are too afraid to open the door, mothers won't let their children out, teenagers join gangs as the only way to find a substitute-security. Shops close down; those that can move out, and street-by-street a community dies.

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Crime destroys security

The last few months have focused our minds on global insecurity. But what about the insecurity on our streets, and not just on the streets, but in our classrooms and casualty wards where teachers and nurses no longer feel safe just doing their jobs? We, in this country, may be free from famine, war and natural disaster, but we are still subject to the insecurity generated by crime and disorder. The cause of this insecurity is not only the official count of reported instances of particular crimes, but also the everyday acts of disorder that are deemed too minor to warrant police attention – the anti-social activities of the bad neighbour who steers (just) clear of breaking the law but who nevertheless does much to damage the tranquillity of the neighbourhood.

Fear of crime and disorder diminishes the sense of security, driving adults and their children out of the shared spaces where the neighbourly society is built. What we see in too many neighbourhoods is a vicious circle of disorder leading to insecurity, then to community breakdown, then to the retreat of socialising influences, and therefore to further disorder.

It is the poor that suffer most of all. New Labour's 'causes of crime' rhetoric wrongly identifies poverty as a mechanistic cause of criminal behaviour; but, with crushing irony, it ignores the status of the poor as the principal victims of crime. Only recently has the present Home Secretary – to his credit – begun to acknowledge the effect of crime on the poor. The official statistics show that people in social housing are twice as likely to be burgled as homeowners; residents of flats are twice as likely to have a vehicle stolen than those in detached homes; and the unemployed are twice as likely to suffer violent crime as those in work.⁴

More than a year has passed since the shocking murder of Damilola Taylor. The outcry that followed prompted a major

⁴ *The 2001 British Crime Survey, First Results*, England and Wales, Home Office Statistical Bulletin, 18 January 2001.

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government effort on the North Peckham Estate where Damilola lived and died. In 12 months, 505 flats have been demolished and 133 new homes built, the police presence has been increased and resources have been ploughed into local schools. But the testimony of local people is that they still live in fear.

A mother of a three year old said:

When Damilola died, the cameras and reporters saw how we were living and the council seemed ashamed. But we are still here and things are no better.⁵

A disabled woman said:

People don't go out at night; it can be terrifying.⁶

A shopkeeper said:

Just look over there at those people; they are drug dealers and will quite openly ask you if you want anything. Tell me, does that look like change to you?⁷

A pensioner said:

It's nice to see they've finally tidied up the churchyard for Mr Blair, but they wouldn't like him to see this place at night... It's very sad to say but, even after Damilola, nothing's changed.⁸

One thing is clear. Labour's crude economic determinism will not improve those lives made a daily hell by crime. The failure to deliver real change in North Peckham is not an accident. It arises from a failure of analysis cloaked in a tough rhetoric so far unaccompanied by effective action to restore security. Improvement of the housing stock and increased funding for schools is not a cure-all. We need a deeper understanding of what is really going on in our society.

⁵ *The Independent*, 27 November 2001.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Times*, 28 November 2001.

⁸ *The Independent*, 27 November 2001.

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Since the war, trends toward greater wealth, better education, wider car ownership, new communications technologies and looser social ties have created entirely new forms of community. Most importantly there are the *virtual communities* whose members don't need to know their neighbours or use the shared spaces of their neighbourhoods. They have the means to isolate themselves from their immediate physical surroundings, and engage over time and space with the people and places of their choosing. In a world of high-speed transport and even faster communications, this is how enormous numbers of people live today.

But not everyone shares in these new possibilities, especially the poor, the unemployed, the elderly, young people, the disabled and members of ghettoised ethnic groups. For many people in these categories, it remains true that community – if it is anywhere – is where you live. That is why the poor are more vulnerable to crime. They rely on the traditional neighbourhood community, where anti-social behaviour has its greatest impact; where shutting out the criminal also means shutting out your friends and neighbours and other sources of support; where those without the means to get out just have to endure.

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IT IS TIME FOR THE Conservative Party to reclaim its lost inheritance, both as the 'party of law and order' and as the 'party of one nation'. Our message must be this: that the only just society is a crime-free society.

To make good that message, we have to find the means of re-establishing the cycle of responsibility, of recreating the neighbourly society, where these have broken down.

Current policies aren't working

We can all think of 'bad neighbourhoods' or 'rough areas', some of which have achieved national notoriety, others only local infamy. However, few, if any, started off that way. Even the worst designed of Britain's post-war estates began with crime rates at a fraction of what they are now. In other cases, once respectable neighbourhoods have been dragged down by a cycle of crime and dereliction. One such neighbourhood is Burnley Wood in Lancashire. The slide began when a few abandoned, but structurally sound, houses were boarded up. In the back lanes discarded furniture accumulated, ignored by refuse collectors, but attracting fly tippers. Vandals and arsonists followed behind, prompting another wave of residents to abandon their homes. As one resident explained:

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I was brought up in Burnley Wood and it was a nice area until a few years ago. Then the rot set in. Now there are fires in the empty houses, windows put out, rubbish everywhere – it's just not safe for me.⁹

The shocking fact is that all this has happened since the mid-1990s. At a time when the national media spoke of nothing but rocketing property prices, the people of Burnley Wood suffered an epidemic of negative equity. Houses bought for £30,000 were made worthless within in a few short years. Many homeowners have simply walked away and, in Burnley as a whole, 5,000 homes lie empty. The local authorities are now involved in desperate efforts to revive the housing market. But state-provided economic solutions will not solve essentially social problems.

There are no economic excuses. The decline of manufacturing in the North West cannot explain the fate of Burnley Wood. The same destruction of the neighbourly society can take place where regional economies are booming. The North Peckham Estate, for instance, lies at the heart of a job-generating metropolis. And yet, as regeneration money is ploughed in, crime continues to blight local lives.

Nor can this be blamed on some inherent inner city malaise. Crime can destroy communities in every place and at every scale from entire conurbations to tiny villages. In my own constituency of West Dorset there are villages, which tourists may think of as quaint, but where lives are still ruined with impunity by the actions of just one bad neighbour.

All kinds of community may fall prey to the vicious circle that gradually destroys the neighbourly society, but in each case the underlying pattern is the same. The process starts with low level disorder, be it petty vandalism, fly-tipping or casual intimidation. The environment is degraded, creating niches for crime and obstacles to community action. Rising crime and a heightened fear of crime prompt those that can get out to do so. Those that are

⁹ *The Guardian*, 7 November 2001.

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left are those who cannot afford to leave and are also those who rely most on the retreating tide of local shops, employers, public services and community institutions.

The eventual outcome varies from case to case. At the extreme, whole streets and estates are bulldozed and grassed over, proof that crime can quite literally destroy community. More often the result is a pocket of degradation. This may spread or it may be contained, either way it is a centre for the criminal operations which affect us all. The worst effect is on those too poor to live anywhere else, but too honest to profit from the disorder that mounts around them.

Tackling degradation

It makes sense that we should break the vicious circle at its weakest point, the point at which the signs of environmental degradation and low-level disorder are just emerging.

At its simplest this means making neighbourhoods safe for children to play in, towing away abandoned cars, removing rubbish, repairing playgrounds, pushing out the drug-dealers. More trusting than adults, children may be the first to re-colonise the shared spaces of safer neighbourhoods. But then parents may gather round their playing children and start chatting among themselves, perhaps keeping an eye on each others' children and swapping neighbourhood news. This is the start of community. It may be informal, but it generates the networks that police and teachers and care workers can be part of. And it generates the right relationships between neighbours, generations and ethnic groups that children learn from as they grow older. And out of the informal community, comes organised community action, with neighbours forming their own mutual aid groups or feeling a greater sense of ownership over projects run by outside organisations.

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High-level policing and active community policing

None of this can work until and unless a combination of high-level policing and criminal intelligence with tough sentencing have removed from the midst of the affected community the drug barons and the organised criminals whose interests are wholly opposed to the recreation of the neighbourly society. Nor can the cycle of responsibility be re-established unless there is highly active community policing, providing a visible police presence, reassuring the law-abiding, and convincing the young people who are at the early stages of the conveyor belt that the choice of a criminal lifestyle will be unpleasant and unrewarding.

Civil society in action: the formation of character

But recreating the neighbourly society also involves dealing with individuals as individuals. Crime is not impersonal; it is not some generalised phenomenon spread indiscriminately through a local population. Crime is committed by individuals: criminals do not spring fully formed at birth or at any given age; nor do their law-abiding neighbours. The choice between criminality and neighbourliness takes place within an individual consciousness. The manifest battleground between crime and social may be the shared spaces of a neighbourhood, but the deeper battle is within the conscience of the individual.

It is the formation of character within the family and within the wider community that can alone lead us from broken communities and broken laws towards the neighbourly society. To deprive a child of the support and kindly discipline that forms character is to commit an act of inhumanity, to start the child on the conveyor belt to a life of crime. The object of policy must be to bolster those institutions that can provide the character-formation which is the indispensable precondition of neighbourliness.

A great part of the burden has to be borne by our schools and teachers. A significant contribution also needs to be made by the incentives provided in our tax and social security system. These are areas of social policy on which the Conservative Party is working

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and which – while too large to be covered in this lecture – will have a huge influence on our success or failure in fighting crime.

But we cannot expect to rely solely on action by agencies of the state. We must look, also, to the work of the voluntary sector. Many of the most important voluntary acts will inevitably be on so small and personal a scale as to be virtually invisible. Some, however, of the pioneering projects are visible.

There is, for example, a YMCA programme that uses a shared love of sport to bring fathers together with their sons. Britain suffers from an epidemic of father absence. More than a fifth of our children now live without their fathers and, for half of these, contact is so infrequent that they are effectively fatherless. Through activities as straightforward as a football match (of the sort that is an everyday occurrence in a functioning family) projects like this work to restore relationships weakened by desertion and divorce.

Not all is lost or gained in the family. There is a battle to be won in the classroom too. *DARE* is a charity that works with Police Officers to provide drug education programmes in schools. The ethos is one of moral responsibility. The message is that there are choices between right and wrong to be made and that children should be told the truth. *DARE* supplies education resources at no cost to police forces and schools, as funding is raised from local communities and other voluntary sources.

Even at the far end of the conveyor belt to crime – in prison – there is an opportunity for civil society to provide exit points through rehabilitation. I made a visit to The Verne prison recently. The Verne is one of three prisons in which an entire wing has been taken over by the Kainos Community Trust, a charity that has pioneered a new approach to changing the lives of prisoners. The results of the programme are striking, the transformation in the way that prisoners think about themselves, the prison authorities and their social responsibilities is profound. As prison officials said themselves, conditions before Kainos were horrendous. But within two years, the violence and the threat of violence that haunted the wing were gone.

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Another charity whose work I recently saw, concerns itself with working alongside the probation service to reintroduce ex-prisoners to a useful role in society once they emerge – and starts its work whilst they are still in prison. This builds on the long efforts of NACRO.

From these few points of light we can draw hope – but only if they are allowed to gather and multiply. And that is just the problem. There are those with a vested interest in the existing system, who fear the introduction of new approaches not because they might fail, but because they might succeed. When I visited the Kainos wing, for example, I heard to my astonishment that the Home Office had ordered its closure for reasons that the Home Secretary has been unable to explain.

We must seek solutions that open up the system to the riches of civil society. We must remove the obstacles and inequities that stop what works from working for those that need it. Let us look for what changes lives, not for the easy life of establishments.

Re-establishing the neighbourly society

So this is our approach: to break the vicious circle that destroys community through a proper combination of sophisticated high-level policing and highly active community policing, drawing on all the agencies of the state and of local government; to remove the barriers that stop the community from supporting the individual; and, by these means, to facilitate the re-establishment of the neighbourly society where it has broken down, in order to restore the cycle of responsibility. This does not necessarily involve more police. It does involve more effective use of existing police resources. It will also require the active co-operation of local inhabitants and of voluntary agencies.

This will form a new chapter in the Conservative approach to fighting crime – but one which is a logical evolution from the policies of the last Conservative government. Then, we rebuilt our defences against rising crime and began to beat it back. We gave

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the courts power to take thousands of persistent criminals off the streets in order to protect the individuals, households and businesses that they exploited and plagued. We must continue and enhance that effort against organised crime with all the sophisticated apparatus of criminal intelligence at our disposal. But our new task must be to strike at the heart of crime: by active community policing which makes criminality a lifestyle that fewer and fewer people are inclined to choose, by tackling neighbourhood degradation and bringing the resources both of the state and of the voluntary sector to bear, in order to give communities the means literally to re-form themselves as the guarantors of the cycle of responsibility.

The task of restoring the neighbourly society where it has broken down is a task for a political party which understands that politics has its limits as well as its uses – a party which understands that, when freed from the suffocating menace of crime, communities are spontaneous, innovative and personal in a way that governments and bureaucracies are not and can never be.