

The Official History of Criminal Justice in England and Wales. Volume IV: The Politics of Law and Order

David Downes and Tim Newburn, *The Official History of Criminal Justice in England and Wales. Volume IV: The Politics of Law and Order*, Routledge, London, 2023: 342pp.: 9781032362519, 120.00 (hbk)

Thomas Guiney, University of Nottingham, UK

In the opening scene of the movie *Birdman* - winner of the 2015 Academy Award for Best Picture - the audience is introduced to the film's protagonist while a bewildered narrator asks, '[h]ow did we end up here? This place is horrible...'. My thoughts often drift back to this scene when I am asked to reflect on the politics of punishment in England and Wales. In recent decades, a burgeoning academic literature has documented the shifting contours of a more assertive law and order politics, the extraordinary growth of the carceral state and the malign effects of a new, and largely unpredicted, populist punitiveness (Bottoms 1995: 40). Like our exasperated narrator, understanding how we got here remains amongst the most pressing tasks in contemporary scholarship (see e.g. Brangan 2021), and work in the historical criminology tradition has made considerable strides in seeking to assemble a comprehensive and empirically rich account of these penal developments (Churchill, Yeomans and Channing 2021).

In *The Official History of Criminal Justice in England and Wales. Volume IV: The Politics of Law and Order*, Downes and Newburn make a significant contribution to this research agenda and demonstrate the continued value of careful 'historical thinking' in the penal field. Commissioned by the Cabinet Office, this is the fourth volume in a collaboratively written series of official histories that draws upon interviews, British Government records, and papers housed in private, and institutional collections to analyse the evolution of criminal justice in England and Wales between 1959 and 1997. Volume I: *The Liberal Hour* (2020); Volume II: *Institution Building* (2020); Volume III: *The Rise and Fall of Penal Hope* (2021) and Volume IV: *The Politics of Law and Order* (2023) are now published with one final volume on policing expected in due course.

Part One, presents a broad historical periodisation of law-and-order politics in England and Wales. Chapter 2 examines the post war decades when crime control was still considered a largely non-partisan issue. Chapter 3 examines the period between 1970 and 1979 when the first cracks in the post-war consensus became visible and the Conservative Party took steps to draw a connection between crime, protest and civil disorder linked to industrial disputes. Chapter 4 reflects upon the period from 1979-1992 when the Conservative Party secured an unprecedented four successive General Election victories. While identifying a significant hardening of law and order rhetoric under Thatcher's leadership it is apparent that her Home Secretaries still enjoyed considerable leeway to pursue a broadly liberal penal policy programme with limited pushback from the Prime Minister or Labour opposition. Chapter 5 examines the extraordinary 'punitive turn' in British penal policy between 1992 and 1997 when both the Major Government and Labour Party began to actively contest the politics of law and order.

Part Two, draws out a number of cross-cutting themes for further discussion. Chapter 6 traces the key fault lines that have defined the politics of law and order since 1945 and how these positions were refracted through the shifting ideological commitments of the main political parties. Chapter 7 reflects upon the role of pressure groups, 'think tanks' and professional interest groups and how their proximity to power has ebbed and flowed over time. Chapter 8 presents a very welcome discussion of moments of 'scandal and concern' while Chapter 9 draws these themes together by way of conclusion. Part Three provides a short postscript to the events documented here. In Chapter 10 the authors bring the story up-to-date and reflect upon the period from 1997 to 2010 when the Labour Party were in power. While the final years of the twentieth century were marked by considerable policy continuity with the previous Conservative government, the new millennium saw the development of a distinctive 'New Labour' law and order agenda that crystallised around the themes of managerialism, anti-social behaviour and an acceleration of the penal populism unleashed by Howards 'prison works speech'.

This is a timely, authoritative and meticulously researched study that will appeal to criminologists, legal academics, political scientists and criminal justice historians. The text is accessible and engaging with a well-crafted contemporary relevance that should be essential reading for those criminal justice 'insiders' with the power and ambition to drive substantive penal change in England

and Wales. Longstanding readers of the Oxford Handbook of Criminology will recognise the overarching historical periodisation presented in Part One of the book and these developments benefit from the additional breathing space afforded by a long-form monograph. The authors clearly relish this opportunity to range widely and are arguably at their best when reflecting upon the momentous events of the early 1990s which saw the main political parties gradually coalesce around a new second order consensus on crime with significant implications for the humanity, fairness and effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

As I noted in an earlier review of Volume II: Institution Building (Guiney 2022), this strategy of tacking closely to the extant historical record is both a strength and weaknesses of this project. Given the scope of the Official History, opportunities for engagement with social theory are necessarily limited, and difficult editorial decisions have inevitably resulted in the omission of noteworthy topic areas including immigration control, terrorism and youth justice. In less capable hands this could have resulted in a text that is rich in its description of the Westminster and Whitehall bubbles, but rather lacking in critical analysis and commentary. However, the inclusion of Part II brings welcome balance to this book and more than repays careful reading. The authors provide a fascinating overview of the gradual evolution of the Labour Party's law and order platform in government and opposition, while the discussion of scandal and concern will provide important insights for those seeking to understand politics in action.

Overall, then, this is an impressive study that more than justifies its place in the Official History series. The breadth and richness of the historical material compiled here is to be applauded, and I have no doubt that this volume will become an essential point of reference for researchers seeking to understand the politics of law and order in England and Wales. Like the narrator in *Birdman*, we may never completely shake our deep seated feelings of exasperation and despair, but we can at least take some comfort in a book that provides a systematic account of how we got here, and more importantly perhaps, what we can learn from our recent history.

References

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