

Cameron's crime speech was a delicate balancing act of burnishing the Prime Minister's credibility and keeping as many key constituencies as possible onside whilst doing so

Tim Newburn analyses David Cameron's recent speech on crime and argues that it was not really about moving the debate on but aimed at grabbing headlines and enhancing the image of the Prime Minister. This underlines a consistent pattern amongst politicians of talking tough on crime more frequently than intelligently on crime prevention.



The week began with a major government speech on [crime and justice](#). Not by the Home Secretary or Justice Secretary, but by the Prime Minister. As is now common practice for big political speeches, it was quite heavily trailed in the media prior to delivery. Such pre-publicity builds up interest and also gives the opportunity for media coverage to be extended over two or more days. Social media also helped it along. The twittersphere was buzzing prior to the speech, throughout its delivery and kept going for a good few hours afterward.

Of all the excerpts pre-released to the press it was the phrase 'tough but intelligent' that got the most traction. This we were told was how the PM saw the future of penal policy, avoiding the sterile stand-off between authoritarians and liberals on law and order. Although the speech would contain its fair share of 'tough' words like retribution, punishment, prison, he also wanted to focus on the 'help' that offenders need, the creation of 'opportunities and chances away from crime'.

The speech, as delivered, was an interesting mixture of rehashed Tony Blair rhetoric, a re-announced 'rehabilitation revolution', now to be managed by Chris Grayling rather than Ken Clarke, a promise to put 'rocket boosters' under payment by results, and really very little else. It began, a la Blair, with the setting out of a series of dualisms – tough/soft, lock'em up/let'em out, blame the criminal/blame society – swiftly and surely followed by acknowledgement that government policy isn't that simple. 'We're so busy going backwards and forwards', he said, 'we never move the debate on'. Of course, anyone imagining that the speech was really likely to move the debate on was always going to be disappointed. Rare is it that game changers appear in such forums. In fact, in reality the Cameron speech was something we have become very used to – a vehicle through which a headline or two can be grabbed, a few ideas can be floated (usually in the pre-speech briefings) and if necessary then quietly dropped, all whilst attempting the delicate balancing act of burnishing the Prime Minister's credibility and keeping as many key constituencies as possible onside whilst doing so.

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This balancing act was truly a sizeable one. Cameron was simultaneously speaking to traditional backbench Tories who want red meat and little else in their crime policy, to Treasury and others concerned with massive reductions to budgets and spending (police and prisons are very expensive), to reformers of all stripes who wish to see more emphasis on prevention, to members of the public services unhappy at the reform agenda, and to sceptics inside his own party and outside who suspect the government is stumbling from crisis to crisis rather than steering a carefully charted course.

Setting up and then knocking down the tough versus soft straw man allowed the Prime Minister to outline the importance of being 'tough but intelligent'. As a phrase it's not bad, but everyone including the 'heir to Blair' as he once styled himself, can see that 'tough on crime, intelligent on the causes of crime' is not quite up there as a soundbite. At a general level much of the 'intelligent' end of the speech was commendable: recognising the need to deal with the lack of educational and job opportunities, offer drug services, make the justice system transparent, and thinking much more carefully about prisoner release. However, it offered little detail on how any of this could be achieved, still less paid for, aside from an emphasis on payment by results 'right across rehabilitation'.

This announcement – the only one in the speech – struck an odd chord in at least two ways. First, whilst payment by results may well have much to commend it in principle, it is as yet entirely unproven in practice in the justice field. Yes, there are pilot programmes underway but they are not complete and the [results are not available](#). What is 'intelligent' we might reasonably ask about setting up pilot projects and then announcing their roll-out before we know whether they work? Second, even assuming there were to be some positive results, doesn't government imposition of such a regime sit a little oddly with Cameron's dismissal of target-setting as 'top-down, bureaucratic, centralising'?

When it came to it, the Prime Minister spent much more time talking about the need to be tough than he did about being intelligent. On several occasions he talked about the need for 'tough, no-nonsense policing'. Indeed, in commending the government's target-scraping approach he said they'd given the police a single, core objective – to cut crime. Again, for anyone who is at all familiar with the nature and complexity of policing, this hardly comes across as especially intelligent. Bail must get tougher he suggested. The prosecution system must be toughened; community sentences and prison regimes too. All in all he used the word 'tough' more than twice as frequently as 'intelligent', and some of the occasions when the latter was deployed it was merely as a descriptor for already existing reforms such as the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners. All in all it was a speech that was pretty tough on crime, but only sporadically intelligent on the causes of crime.

In fact, Cameron's speech owes more to Blair than its imitation of 'third way' politics on law and order. It was Blair, more than any other Prime Minister, who took to giving speeches on crime and justice when it might have been expected that the Minister responsible would be in the vanguard. In fact, successive Home Secretaries – Straw, Blunkett, Clarke, Reid – repeatedly found No.10 appropriating what they might reasonably have considered their territory, most egregiously in the Street Crimes Initiative in 2002 when police force responses to street robbery were micro-managed from Downing Street.

Perhaps the single greatest insight into how Blair worked this territory came from a memo we were never meant to see. Either leaked, or 'retrieved' from the dustbin of Labour pollster Philip Gould, the memo which was written by Blair in late April 2000 was subsequently reprinted in full by The Sun. In it, Blair ranged over a series of topics. On crime, he signalled he was concerned about the soon to be published street crime statistics and suggested that the government lacked a robust message to deal with this. His response? "We should think now of an initiative", he suggested, "something tough, with immediate bite which sends a message through the system." And then, most revealingly, he said: "But this should be done soon and I, personally, should be associated with it."



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By continuing to look to link himself to crime and justice issues perhaps Cameron really is the heir to Blair. When times are tough, be tough on crime. As we have become all too used to in this area, yet again the speech appeared to be more about positioning and profile than about substance. True, elements of it were sensible, and there was little that was objectionable. Its worst fault was the lack of confidence it displayed at its heart. The speech was delivered only days after the last crime figures were published. They come as close as statistics ever can to entirely good news for government. Crime overall down. Most categories of crime down. And this on top of recent year on year drops in crime. And yet it merited only two fairly fleeting sentences from the Prime Minister. Why? The answer is surely he is still convinced that the public cannot be trusted to understand that reducing crime is about more than just being tough. It is about investing in probation services and in other rehabilitative interventions, and in ensuring that there are educational and employment opportunities for offenders – among many other things.

To be fair to Cameron, recent Labour Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries were also regularly guilty of the same failing. And there is little sense that the Labour Party in opposition is minded to change its ways. The problem is that after years and years of doing little more than attempting to outbid each other on toughness, and the PM's protestations to the contrary yesterday, there is still far too little political faith in the alternatives. It was telling, for example, that the probation service only merited one mention in yesterday's speech, and then as a slight. We still appear to be stuck in the territory that law and order politics has been for the best part of two decades and nothing in yesterday's speech suggested any imminent change. It is by no means unlikely that the Prime Minister hankers after a more intelligent approach to criminal justice policy. Sadly, as things stand neither he nor his opponents appear to be politically tough enough to be openly intelligent on crime.

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