

JUST TALK?

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In any discussion of the role and function of the Australian Crime Prevention Council it is not uncommon for it to be asserted that the Council does nothing of practical value. The whole organisation is 'just talk' it is claimed; in the 16 years of its existence it has not reduced crime, prevented recidivism or made life any safer or happier for the average Australian citizen. Needless to say, the same criticisms are not infrequently made of the Australian Institute of Criminology, the body for which I work.

To some extent these criticisms are absolutely true as neither the Council nor the Institute is directly engaged in the business of arresting offenders, rehabilitating prisoners or selling security devices. Private or organisational members of the Council may be actively engaged in these fields, but the Council as such claims no responsibility (nor does the Institute) for the successes or failures that may be seen in these important activities.

So, if it is all 'just talk', perhaps we should ask ourselves whether it is worthwhile, and the firm and resolute answer that should come from every member of the Council, and from the staff of the Institute, is that what is most needed in the whole field of crime and criminal justice is more talk, more consensus, more rationality and less emotion.

All of us are worried about crime. The latest public opinion polls show that Australians rate violent crime third among the matters of concern to them, with only marginally more concern being expressed about unemployment and inflation. In the United States the polls invariably show that crime is the primary concern. We also know that, to the extent that it is possible to draw conclusions from inadequate data, the predominant trend in Australian criminal statistics is towards ever increasing crime rates. It will probably not be many years before our public opinion polls show similar results to those found in America.

We may be concerned, but the problem is there is no universal agreement about what should be done to reduce our crime rates. Most of us would have ideas and these range all the way from advocating capital and corporal punishment to being kind and considerate to criminals. Many of us would reject both of these extremes, but the point is that no consensus exists. As a community we, and our elected representatives at all levels of government, have no accepted policy which is going to prevent crime.

And it is not an easy matter to contemplate such a policy. The more we put our minds to it, the more obvious it becomes that we need more information. We lack the basic facts about the real incidence of

criminal behaviour and the functioning of our criminal justice systems which are absolutely essential if we are to define the problem as a preliminary step to proposing solutions. This is where the Institute will be of assistance. With its function of advising on the compilation of statistics relating to crime, the Institute is endeavouring to encourage the development of uniform statistics of a more reliable and comprehensive nature than are now available.

Much more needs to be done in this area but the Institute's research into the principles of sentencing, the use of imprisonment, juvenile justice, public safety indicators, life sentences, probation, rape, car stealing and mentally ill offenders, as well as its computerised national bibliography of criminological material are all intended to fill gaps in our knowledge. Similarly, the many seminars and workshops organised by the Training Division of the Institute have provided a vehicle for the dissemination of such information as is currently available.

The Institute is still in its infancy and will need many more years of development before it achieves the level of maturity and sophistication which will allow it to claim that it has the answers to the majority of the questions it is asked. Given time, and the parallel development of its sister organisation, the Criminology Research Council, we may expect the level of debate on crime and justice in this country to significantly improve as a result of the availability of more information.

But even with the best information possible, talk is still essential as preventing crime is a matter of philosophy, of politics and of style as much as it is a matter of hard facts. Fundamental questions such as to what extent are we prepared to surrender individual freedoms in order to make police work more efficient can never be resolved by facts alone, but must be thoroughly discussed at all levels of society. Similarly, the rights of prisoners will be determined on political and philosophical grounds with little reference to hard data.

And what of justice? That fragile concept which is protected by a complex network of rules and procedures is frequently found to be not as robust as we had hoped. Concern for justice must be at the root of all plans for crime prevention, as an unjust society does not deserve protecting. Talk about justice may be 'just talk', but it is absolutely vital to the community's well-being, and the Australian Crime Prevention Council with its current structure of membership must be seen as the most appropriate form for that talk to take place. More strength to it.
