

"A Vision For Criminal Justice"

For friends who have not read this document, The Meeting For Sufferings committee has asked individual meetings to give thought to what the right aims of a criminal justice system, specifically, the British criminal justice system, should be. How might those aims be achieved in a way consistent with a spiritually led Quaker world view?

A "vision Document" has been produced by QPSW's Crime Community and Justice sub-committee, in an attempt to articulate the principles by which Quakers might examine our system of criminal justice in terms of how well its operation meets our view of crime and its consequences for the individual and for society as a whole.

Taking the words of Edward Burrough in QFP 23'11 as its touchstone, the committee sets out a vision of criminal justice which should be "Compassionate, forgiving and healing - restorative not retributive."

In our attitudes to crime and its victims, we need to be clear about the objectives of our response before responding.

"We are for holding offenders accountable for their actions and for balancing wrongdoing by reparation. We are for a response to crime based on making things better for the victim and the offender, and thus for society. punishment alone disengages people further from the society that imposes it."

This is the context in which we should frame, for example, our approach to sentencing. How best can it meet the aims implicit in our desire for justice which is nonretributive and, wherever possible, restorative to both the offender and the victim.

A high level of expertise is called for, since offenders and victims alike may be vulnerable adults or children, damaged by their life experiences, and/or afflicted with mental illness. For that reason, our response to crime and sentencing must not be based primarily on its cost, and the committee questions whether private profit is an appropriate motivation for those concerned with the treatment of victims and offenders, whether in prison, or in the community.

In outlining a vision for a criminal justice system in which the benefits of forgiveness would be made available to all concerned, we are presented with a challenge which is unlikely to be met by a political system in which cost is primarily thought of as financial. This is why Quakers speak from outside the party political arena. As Edward Burrough wisely said in 1659, "We are not for names, nor men, nor titles of government, nor are we for this party or against the other. But we are for justice and mercy and truth and peace and true freedom..."

In this sense, Quakers might think of a just society as a primary objective; not a concept to be tinkered with when we think we can afford it.

Reg Webb