

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his post, which is an excellent job that I am sure he will enjoy. Will he confirm to the House that reoffending rates fell considerably under the Labour Government, not least because of the 70% increase in probation funding over those 13 years? Will he also clarify what I think he said—that the £870 million budget agreed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) in October 2009 is now £850 million? What discussions has he held—and will he hold—with probation services about the impact of that £20 million cut?

Mr Blunt: As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, I have referred to the £20 million cut. The director of the National Offender Management Service and the regional offender managers will be doing their level best, in agreement with the probation trusts, to ensure that that reduction does not have an impact on services. However, we ought to remember that the budget settlement for the probation trusts that was agreed just more than a year ago was £844 million. That budget was being worked to during the transfer from probation boards to probation trusts, and that transfer was supposed to drive forward many efficiency savings to ensure that front-line services were delivered as efficiently as they should be.

Sentencing Policy

2. **Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con):** What timetable he has set for the completion of his Department's review of sentencing policy. [2216]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Crispin Blunt): We are conducting a comprehensive assessment of sentencing policy with a view to introducing more effective sentencing and rehabilitation policies. We will take the time to get it right, and will consult widely before bringing forward coherent plans for reform. We intend to bring forward proposals on sentencing and the rehabilitation of offenders after the House returns from recess in October.

Tony Baldry: Does my hon. Friend agree that the punishment, in being sent to prison, is the loss of freedom? Does he also agree that what is important is trying to reduce reoffending rates, and ensuring that when people are in prison, they undertake activities that mean that they are less likely to reoffend when they are released? Alternatively, we might have not so many people going to prison, but if they are to be punished in the community, that punishment should involve activities that help to reduce the chances of reoffending. It is reducing the reoffending rate that is so important.

Mr Blunt: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We have inherited a disaster, in terms of the reoffending rate among short-sentence prisoners. I do not think that anyone would want to defend the reoffending rate in that category, which is somewhere between 60% and 70%. Prisoners in that category do not receive probation supervision, and if we do not engage them with the great army of auxiliaries in the third sector who want to help us with offender management, we will not be able to address offender behaviour in the way that my hon. Friend suggests.

Alun Michael (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister undertake to read the excellent report drawn up on a cross-party basis by members of the Select Committee on Justice not long before Dissolution, which proposes a number of ways in which the large amount of resources that go into the criminal justice system could be focused more effectively on reducing reoffending?

Mr Blunt: Yes. The report is excellent, and it will inform the proposals that we bring forward when the House returns in October.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that it adds insult to injury when a victim of crime, having seen the perpetrator sentenced, finds that the person is released halfway through their sentence? What steps will we take to reintroduce honesty in sentencing?

Mr Blunt: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, because plainly the proposals that were in the Conservative manifesto will inform the outcome of the sentencing review. I am quite sure that he will be satisfied with the outcome, and that we will have a great deal more honesty in sentencing at the end of the process than we have today.

Prison Capacity

3. **Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab):** What plans he has for prison capacity and prison construction programmes. [2217]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Crispin Blunt): We must provide prison places for those whom the courts judge should receive a custodial sentence. As I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), we intend to bring forward proposals on rehabilitation and sentencing after the House returns in October. Long-term decisions on prison capacity programmes will be taken in the light of the policy agreed at the end of the process.

Mr Jones: On 30 January 2007, when asked whether we needed more prisons, the Prime Minister said, on the Jon Gaunt "talkSPORT" show:

"Yes...no doubt more prisons have got to be built."

How does that fit with the Justice Secretary's announcement this week that he would like to see fewer people in prison? Is this an example of Opposition rhetoric catching up with the Prime Minister, or is it yet another example of a policy disagreement between the Prime Minister and the Justice Secretary?

Mr Blunt: Absolutely not. I notice that the date to which the hon. Gentleman referred was in 2007, and there certainly has been a significant increase in the prison population between then and today. As far as the prison building programme is concerned, I draw attention to the evidence that the then Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor gave to the Committee referred to by the right hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Alun Michael). He said that the prison building programme, as it now stands, is an opportunity to upgrade and update our prison capacity to make it more fit for the purpose of addressing reoffending