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An honest politician's guide to crime control

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It might seem an unduly provocative title for a Brisbane Institute seminar, but it is actually the title of a criminology classic published more than 30 years ago. Not much of what it proposed was ever picked up by politicians, honest or otherwise.



July 30 seminar:
Honest Politician's
Guide to Crime Control

Nevertheless, the book has traveled well. It is still in print, from the University of Chicago, students in crime and justice from all around the world are still required to read it and the web is littered with quotes and other references.

The book was the product of two "Australian" criminologists. New Zealand born, Melbourne educated Norval Morris is still an Emeritus Professor of Law and Criminology at the University of Chicago. Professor Gordon Hawkins, once of Sydney University, seems to be attached to universities on three continents.

The book was highly provocative in 1970, and in many ways still is. Morris and Hawkins in particular wanted to evict the law from areas where it had no business being:

"The prime function of the criminal law is to protect our persons and our property; these purposes are now engulfed in a mass of other distracting, inefficiently performed, legislative duties. When the criminal law invades the spheres of private morality and social welfare, it exceeds its proper limits at the cost of neglecting its primary tasks. This unwarranted extension is expensive, ineffective, and criminogenic."

But they also wanted to ban criminologist from two favourite preoccupations - researching the "causes of crime" and the "costs of crime". What they did want researched with the costs of alternative strategies of crime control.

Years head of time, they wanted compensation for victims of crime. It is now here but it is often not adequate. They were - and remember they were writing initially in America for Americans - very down on guns. There was, they thought, no reason for private individuals to own handguns. And naturally they saw no criminological point or purpose in capital punishment.

Police salaries should relate to equivalent levels for lawyers and judges - now there is a popular recommendation for the persons in blue - but police should not be involved in investigating complaints against police. Traffic law enforcement was a job for somebody else, although, years ahead of its widespread adoption they proposed breath testing punishable with onerous licence suspensions.

But the emphasis should be on crime prevention, using available technologies which governments would, if necessary, trial in selected areas.

The emphasis in corrections should be on community service and rehabilitation not prisons and punishment.

Insanity would be an issue relevant to sentencing and corrections, but Morris and Hawkins would have eradicated it as a defence. This would free up a lot of psychiatrist types to work on better ways of predicting the dangers posed to society by certain types of mental disorder.

With organized crime, the authors contended we were dealing with mythology. Other, later authors have contended that one sure way to organize crime is to send in your average organized crime squad. They tend to round up the least competent, corrupt and violent of the more senior members of loose criminal networks, leaving the field open for the most competent, corrupt and violent. Their efforts thereafter merely serve to regulate the markets for the now more organized criminal gangs, keeping new competition out and prices high.

A Criminal Justice Commission study in Australia noted the peculiarly circular definitions of organized crime in our legislation - it was crime committed by organizations, organizations involved in crime or whatever crimes the legislation defined as organized. Traditionally caught up in such definitions are the vice and drug trades. Down on the streets, however, these trades are often noted for an extreme lack of organization.

Conclude Morris and Hawkins:

"It is perverse to pretend that we do not know how to deal with crime much more effectively than we do deal with it . . . it is inertia far more than ignorance or inadequate resources which impedes action. Given the disposition to act resolutely along the lines of our program, crime need no longer be a source of public alarm and concern.

The problem of crime like the problem of disease is not in any final sense soluble. But it can be subjected to effective control. We cannot expect more; there is no reason why we should be satisfied with less."

Australian Institute of Criminology's Dr Adam Graycar, Professor Ross Homel, the Foundation professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University and his colleague Associate Professor Kathleen Daly will participate in a panel discussion entitled The Honest Politician's Guide to Crime Control on Tuesday 30 July. [Go to event details.](#)

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