

## **DC / Tom ap Rhys Pryce**

The victim impact statements written by Tom ap Rhys Pryce's parents, brother and fiancée, were some of the most powerful things I have ever read. A hard-working, popular, decent young man at the outset of his career, on the eve of his marriage, was struck down in his own neighbourhood as he walked home to his girlfriend. The print-out of his wedding vows, stained with his blood and found in the street, testify to the future that was taken away.

The murder of Mr ap Rhys Pryce represents a challenge to the British state. It demonstrates starkly that the criminal justice system is not working – not the police, who do not stop prolific criminals; not the law, which does not deter them; and not the penal system, which neither punishes nor reforms them.

It also represents a challenge to British society. If we are to prevent teenage boys turning into the monsters who killed Mr ap Rhys Pryce, we have to shore up (and in cases rebuild) the structures which teach moral lessons and constrain criminal impulses. These are families, schools, and communities themselves.

There are two reasons Donnel Carty and Delano Brown stabbed Mr ap Rhys Pryce. The first is that they thought they would get away with it. They had good grounds for this belief. They were both prolific robbers – the police suspect they were responsible for as many as 150 muggings in the previous seven months, sometimes as many as 15 a day. Yet Brown had no criminal record at all, and the worst punishment Carty had ever received was a conditional discharge for assaulting a police officer.

The criminal justice system is quite simply failing to enforce the basic principle of communal life: personal responsibility. Society cannot exist unless the individual carries the consequences of his own actions. And in the case of actions which are criminal, the consequences must be quick, clear, and proportionately painful. As I have said repeatedly, no amount of poverty or deprivation can excuse crime: the blame belongs to the criminal. If Carty and Brown had been arrested at the beginning of their crime spree and sentenced to a stiff punishment, Mr ap Rhys Pryce might be alive today.

This is no time for an exercise in political point-scoring. I do not blame ministers for this tragedy. Yet either this Government, or the next one, must get to grip with the chronic failures that afflict the various arms of the criminal justice system.

In short, there must be zero tolerance of knives, let alone guns. There must be a relentless focus on cutting the low-level disorder and petty crime which, always and everywhere, acts as the seedbed for more serious and violent crime. The public instinctively knows what the priorities of the police should be – which is why we want the local police force to answer directly to local people, rather than to the Home Office.

There must be appropriate punishments for minor offences – meaning punishments that are both tough and constructive. I believe tougher community sentences could both bring home to offenders the seriousness of their crimes, and give them a sense of what hard work actually means. It could also help restore the damage that crime does to the community.

For more serious crime there is only one option: prison. Yet despite having one of the highest crime rates in Europe, Britain has a below-average ratio of crimes to prisoners. We quite simply do not convict and lock up enough criminals. And the principal reason for this is the lack of space. Prisons are close to bursting because, in spite of repeated warnings about overcrowding, the Government will not build more jails. Once again I urge the Government to reverse its policy and begin a prison building programme now.

So this is the responsibility of Government: to ensure that criminals are forced to live with the consequences of their actions, by making the police focus on low-level crime, by handing out proportionate punishments, and by ensuring there are enough prison places for serious criminals.

But stabbing and innocent man while robbing him is more than a rational calculation about the chance of being caught. Murder represents an absolute moral failure. And here is the second reason why Carty and Brown stabbed Mr ap Rhys Pryce. They did it because they didn't care, and because they didn't know the difference between right and wrong.

Both violent crime generally, and violent crimes involving knives specifically, have doubled over the last ten years. These horrific acts are simply the worst expression of a phenomenon we see all around us: a growing culture of disrespect, 'attitude', and straightforward delinquency. This is the consequence of an erosion of what used to be called the moral fabric of society – the sense that your status in the eyes of others depended on living up to positive social expectations. In many of our inner cities today,

as we learn from reading about boys like Carty and Brown, a completely different set of social expectations prevails.

There is only so much that Government can do to repair our society's moral fabric. We can – and should – ensure that schools have more power to discipline pupils who misbehave. We can – and should – remove financial penalties against marriage in the tax and benefits system. But ultimately it is society, not the state, which transmits moral messages to young people.

Most of all, it is families which are primarily responsible for whether a child does well – like Mr ap Rhys Pryce – or goes wrong, like Carty and Brown. And it will surprise no-one to learn that both Carty and Brown grew up in homes without fathers. I hope the men who left those boys' mothers to bring them up alone are reflecting on their own responsibility this week.

In this context I want to pay a special tribute to Mr ap Rhys Pryce's own father. On the radio yesterday morning John ap Rhys Pryce said his feeling towards Carty and Brown was "sorrow", because "their lives have been ruined too." I admire him for that more than words can say. But he might have added that those teenagers' lives were ruined long before that night near Kensal Green station. Strengthening our criminal justice system is vitally necessary, but it is not enough. Until we address the epidemic of family and social breakdown, our society will suffer more tragedies like this one.