

## Labour and Tories are more interested in titillating tabloids than being tough on crime



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Labour and the Tories don't have a clue about how to tackle crime, the Liberal Democrat shadow Home Secretary Chris Huhne told party conference delegates.

These parties are more interested in titillating the tabloids than being tough on crime, he said, and it's time for common sense, not sensationalism. If the Liberal Democrats didn't exist, all there would be on crime and justice from the Tories and Labour would be show-boating and grand-standing.

Claiming the current crime debate is "totally removed from reality", Huhne had a dig at Home Secretary Jacqui Smith when she announced she would take young offenders into hospital to see the consequences of violence. She ignored the evidence from the USA that this kind of thing doesn't cut crime and four days later, he said, she ditched the idea.

Then Huhne tore into Tory leader David Cameron. "He knows that you can get four years in jail for just carrying a knife, but he thinks that judges tiptoe around knife crime," he said. "So he wants to send every knife carrier to prison automatically. Just a small problem. If he did, the prison population would nearly quadruple. The basic rate of income tax would go up by a penny in the pound. Oh, and another problem. The evidence shows it wouldn't work."

Huhne reckoned that what works is visible policing to reassure people they don't need to carry a knife, intelligence led stop and search of hot spots to catch knife carriers, working with the local community to gather leads and encourage witnesses, and "telling it how it is" in schools and colleges. He said this would help to "take back control of the streets".

Huhne accused Labour and the Tories of being "addicted to punishment posturing", which he called "legislative diarrhoea as a substitute for enforcing the law". In its first decade in government, he claimed, Labour produced legislation on crime that takes the same amount of shelf space as 200 copies of War and Peace. Since 1997, Labour introduced 3,600 new criminal offences "even though nearly every offence that people care about has been illegal for years". He added: "You will be relieved to hear that it is now against the law to set off nuclear explosions."

Huhne then criticised the Labour and Tory approach to prison, pointing out that prisoners leave and there is a 92 per cent chance they will offend again. "Our prisons are colleges of crime," he said.

"If prison works so well, why has crime gone down in Denmark while the number of

prisoners has gone down? Why has crime fallen in Canada when the prison population is the same? The government's own top-notch research found no evidence that tougher penalties deterred crime. Let's be clear. We need prison for serious offenders and for serial offences. But we need reformed prisons that educate, occupy and prepare prisoners for life outside."

Huhne reckoned another major problem was that so few people get caught. For every 100 crimes committed in Britain today, one criminal will end up with a conviction, he claimed. "That's a 99 per cent chance of getting away with it. And if you don't catch offenders, no amount of threatening punishments will work."

Huhne continued: "So if we want to cut crime, we should stop posturing about penalties because they are tough enough. The answer's simple. Catch criminals to cut crime."

Yet another problem was police performance, which he said is not monitored as well as it could be. "A senior police officer who has lost motivation is usually left alone," Huhne said. "That's not good for morale. It is not good for ambitious young officers to see deadwood prosper. The force needs to be able properly to reward not just time served, but effort, talent and skills."

He went on: "Worst of all, police pay has become a political football. Police officers cannot by law strike. They suffer the same squeeze on pay and costs as the rest of us, but they cannot get a second job without their Chief Constable's permission. In exchange for those restrictions, ministers must accept the recommendations of the independent police pay tribunal. Police need a pay system which is fair, independent and respected.

"And we need local policing. The Tories and Labour have set central targets that meddle, but do not deliver. They have distorted local priorities. By awarding the same points for minor and serious crimes, they have sucked thousands unnecessarily into the criminal justice system. Central targets mean wasted effort and resources chasing the wrong priorities, which is why they must go. We need local accountability to local people with the powers to set local priorities. If local people do not like the results, they can get rid of the decision-makers."

Turning back to the Tories and their claim to be a 'fair' party, Huhne said: "George Osborne will go fair when George Bush goes green. Fairness will be a Tory value when hell freezes over, Notting Hill becomes a workers' republic, and the Bullingdon club affiliates to the Socialist International. I've got news for David Cameron. You don't make society fairer by hoping for it, or by talking about it. You can only make society fairer by helping the poor and the powerless, and that means giving them more money and more power over their own lives.

"David Cameron, like Tony Blair, wants to be all things to all people. Tories would have us believe they are the party of the environment, and of owners of big cars. Of traditional values and of change. Of equality and of lower taxes on the best off. Of liberty and of removing checks on police surveillance. Of European membership for Georgia and of pulling out of Europe's social chapter for us. If politics is about making tough choices, the Tory party is about ducking hard decisions. A party which has every priority is a party that has none. A party with no heart, no core values and no direction."

Huhne concluded: "Labour can't deliver the change that our nation needs. The Conservatives won't. Only the Liberal Democrats will."