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Opinion

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Making crime pay

As temperatures soar across the UK, the race to define the battleground for the next general election is also hotting up. And it looks as if crime policy has got up early and bagged all the best deckchairs. Why should this be the case when there has been a steady fall in crime figures in recent years?

The risk of becoming a victim of crime has fallen from 40% in 1995 to 26% in 2003/04, according to the British Crime Survey, the lowest level recorded since the BCS began in 1981.

Yet the fear of crime appears to be increasing. Worries range from internationally organised terrorist attacks to more local concerns about mobile phone theft or thugs terrorising the neighbourhood.

In a world where perception increasingly drives policy, being seen to be doing something to keep people safe has risen up the political priority lists of all parties. The government in particular wants to remind voters of Labour's promises to be tough on crime and on its causes.

Recent reports suggest that the next parliamentary session – and most likely the forthcoming party conference season – will therefore be focused on measures designed to cut crime and to reduce the fear of

crime. But how worthwhile are these measures in reducing crime? Are they effective and justifiable uses of public money or are some of them simply an attempt to put a positive spin on a sensitive political issue?

ID cards are a case in point. The British public appears to have turned the corner on this issue since 9/11. Previously, the concept was fairly unpopular but fears about terrorism and the growth in immigration have changed all that.

According to Home Secretary David Blunkett, more than 80% of participants in all focus groups and opinion polls support his proposals to introduce a national identity card. It is now touted as the solution to everything from reducing the arrival of terrorists into the UK to cutting down on benefit fraud and immigrants' use of the NHS.

But such measures don't come cheap. The Home Office's current estimate for the introduction of an ID card system is between £1.3bn and £3.1bn. Based on past experience, the actual cost is likely to be rather higher. So, is this a good use of public funds or would the money be better spent on increasing police numbers or tackling failures in the intelligence service? Most other European countries already have ID cards but

they did not prevent recent terrorist attacks in Spain or Turkey.

Many voters appear to be more worried about antisocial behaviour and smaller crimes that blight the quality of life in their neighbourhoods. Blunkett has a prize for them too, involving plans to work with the environment secretary to crack down on abandoned cars and graffiti – some of the complaints most frequently raised in the government's Big Conversation consultation exercise.

And what of the Tories? Where will they go if New Labour carries on successfully monopolising their traditional stomping ground of law and order? Their focus at the moment appears to be on civil liberties and personal freedom. But how well does this argument sit with the more authoritarian Conservative voters and what new thinking is there for floating voters worried about crime to latch on to?

As Britain has become wealthier, voters are ever more focused on quality of life issues – be it more personalised health care services, better quality education or cleaner, safer streets. Even if crime rates are falling, the perception remains that the streets are not safe enough and that disorder is taking over.

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As New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton discovered, when small crimes are left untended, an atmosphere is created in which people may feel that larger crimes will go unnoticed as well. He famously cleaned up the New York subway by targeting fare dodgers, graffiti artists and other petty criminals. It turned out that these criminals were often involved in a range of other illegal activities as well.

The experience of New York suggests that Blunkett may be right to focus on antisocial behaviour, not just because it is unpopular with voters but also because perceptions actually do matter when it comes to cutting crime. Knowing what is happening on the ground at local level may be as important for cutting serious crime and terrorism as it is for making the community a nicer place to live.

The question remains whether Blunkett will have the time to get six Bills through Parliament and whether the debate over ID cards will overshadow some of the smaller, but probably more effective measures to tackle petty crime.

Either way, as far as the next election is concerned, we can be certain that talking about crime will pay.

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