

Adjunct Professor Paul Rodan, of the Swinburne Institute for Social Research writes in response to Professor Paul Mazerolle's address at the launch of the T J Ryan Foundation.

"Paul's call for an evidence-based approach is welcome, but I would hesitate to label as 'ideological' those who support a different approach while styling myself as ideology-free. This dichotomy can smack a little too much of 'My opponent is an ideological fanatic while I am a person of principle and reason'. Moreover, an evidence-based approach need not be devoid of ideology: many of those in the justice field are motivated by an ideological commitment to the disadvantaged, contesting simplistic notions which ignore or underestimate the complex social and economic causes of crime.

"Where ideology causes activists to deny evidence, that is a different issue and must be confronted, although as we have seen with climate change, it is tough terrain. Paul is on sound ground, in my view, in identifying the internet as a major source for spreading evidence-free views (in this case, on crime), but the same point could be made in other policy areas, with climate change (again) an obvious example. Those who thought the internet would bolster democracy through widespread, intelligent and informed debate may have been a trifle naïve.

"A disconnect in the justice debate is that the 'two sides' can often be addressing different components of the system: the right focussed on punishment/deterrence and the left on rehabilitation. The populist right's barely-suppressed desire to build a gallows in the city square is easy to parody, but progressives do need to acknowledge the punitive element of the justice system. If progressives want to engage the support of ordinary voters for evidence-based policies, they need to accept as valid a concern that punishment be part of the deal.

"Historically, 'law and order' can be a tough policy area for the left electorally, but experience in the United States suggests that help may be available from an unlikely source. Increasingly in that country, fiscal conservatives have joined forces with progressives in questioning incarceration rates and associated policies. Obviously, these conservatives' motives are not of the 'bleeding heart' variety: they are simply unwilling to foot the tax bill which will ensue if everyone the populist right wants to lock up actually is locked up.

Whether such an approach would travel well here is not clear, but it warrants consideration. It is certainly timely for voters to be reminded that the 'lock them up and throw away the key' approach has financial as well as social costs."