

Beyond the Common-sense Revolution in Crime and Justice Policy Making in Queensland

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Colleagues, I am most honoured to be asked to speak on this important launch of the TJ Ryan Foundation. As Ann Scott has just mentioned, the Foundation has a unique role to play in fostering a community of researchers and scholars willing to contribute to a comprehensive body of knowledge to better inform policy and practice and contribute to well-being across the community.

I have been asked to limit my comments to 10 minutes, and to talk about the crime and justice sphere as an area of utmost importance for public policy development in Queensland and an area whereby public policy can be most explicit and impactful.

Most people who have closely watched policy developments in the crime and justice area over time would attest to the ongoing tension between ideology and evidence in the formation of policy and practice. To be sure, the examples whereby governments of all political persuasions have done this well are easily outweighed by instances where ideology has entirely driven or informed the policy making agenda. Indeed, there is no doubt ample evidence to show when governments have tipped the balance far in favour of ideology. Like the economy, crime is an area that generates strong personal feelings about what appropriate responses should look like. Given that most of us or our families have been touched by crime it stands to reason that personal beliefs will be materially shaped by those experiences. Thus, the pull toward ideological approaches to policy development is so strong and so personal is precisely why governments of all persuasions need to embrace research evidence to assist in informing their directions in policy development and implementation in the crime and justice area.

So, the challenge to us and indeed to the TJ Ryan Foundation then becomes how as opposed to why we must move beyond the current **common sense revolution** in crime and justice policy.

For those of you unfamiliar with the **common sense revolution** in crime and justice policy, it dates to the mid to late 1970s and the 1980s whereby we saw increasing trends toward the politicization of crime control across many

western countries. Indeed the common sense revolution brought with it a strong emphasis on what has been termed by Paul Gendreau and others as the **pancephilia of crime control**---the common belief that our crime problems are easily identified, solved, and addressed by making tough, seemingly rational and commonsensical unidimensional responses. In short, crime problems require resolve and commitment and straightforward responses as opposed to well researched solutions.

The **commonsense revolution**, unfortunately has reared its ugly head both in Australia and in Queensland---indeed it is very difficult to kill off. With the globalized world we live in and the role of the internet, it appears that the common sense revolution is contagious. Indeed, it knows no borders and boundaries. Common-sense ideas about crime control are widespread.

Such crime and justice quackery (Latessa, Cullen, and Gendreau, 2002) has been fed no doubt by the increasing unsophisticated media world we live in which strives for sounds bites and quick and easy answers. It has also been fuelled by what others has observed as the fart catcher syndrome (Gendreau, Smith, Theriault, 2009) which involves the proliferation of a content free managerial class in the public service which serves short term political interests absent critical content knowledge about crime and justice portfolios.

So what has the commonsense revolution brought to our communities? Common sense responses to crime control have led to what I call a series of criminological abominations. Responses like three strikes in your out policies, scared straight programs, correctional boot camps, and no frill prisons just to name a few.

These examples reflect areas where there is demonstrable or indeed overwhelming evidence that they do not work. In other cases, there are examples where there is an absence of evidence of effectiveness. In short, the **common sense approach** to crime and justice policy making operates and implements policies in the absence of evidence as well as in the face of counter or negative evidence.

So, in response to those who question what is so wrong with the common sense approach to crime and justice policy, let me identify some areas of concern.

In my view, there are three clear reasons why this is the wrong direction for Queensland and indeed any society who take seriously their duty to respond to challenges presented by crime and justice. First, is that it leads to crime

and justice quackery. It fosters simplistic responses to sophisticated crime problems. It endorses panceaphilia and to cut to the chase, common sense responses are ineffective and can be costly (Gendreau et al., 2009).

Second, common sense responses can lead to iatrogenic effects. In other words, such approaches can directly and indirectly lead to worse outcomes. Some common sense approaches can magnify criminal outcomes ---they can encourage recidivistic offending, and also have an impact on fostering negative mental health and social outcomes, which can indirectly foster further crime and victimisation. In sum, a clear and compelling risk with embracing common-sense approaches to crime is that such approaches can and often do makes things worse. In short, as Gendreau observed, *policies that fail to take evidence and counter evidence seriously are at best worthless and sometimes even harmful.*

Third, when governments embrace common sense approaches they divert resources away from opportunities whereby they could really make a significant difference. By investing in programs lacking evidence they miss opportunities to really affect change and contribute to longer term positive outcomes. By taking the easy panacea approach, they miss opportunities to make lasting and substantial gains at reducing crime over the longer term. Investing in early intervention programs, or nurse home visitation programs may not lead to short term improvements in crime prevention, but through careful research, longer term benefits to crime and health outcomes have been observed. In short, making sustained differences for the community takes patience and commitment.

So, then how can we avoid common sense responses to complex crime and justice problems? How can we stop the common-sense revolution?

First, as researchers we need to raise our game in terms of the quality and accessibility of our research. We must ensure the research we undertake is of high quality, addresses issues of substance and relevance, and is packaged for accessibility for multiple audiences—including academic and practitioner audiences.

Second, as professionals we must do our part to identify crime and justice quackery throughout the policy landscape and work to inform our colleagues in government of the risks and missed opportunities that are evident in the direction they may be forging. In so doing, there are opportunities to mobilise and inform the larger community of the larger risks when valuable public resources are expended on policies that are guaranteed to fail or

make things worse. An increasingly demanding and sophisticated community will begin to question why resources are directed to failed programs and it will be a brave government and perhaps a short lived one that ignores a broader community that expects evidence to inform crime and justice policy responses.

And that leads me to remark that the role of the TJ Ryan Foundation is instrumental on this journey of embracing evidence to inform policy in Queensland. We are uniquely placed in Queensland and particularly in Brisbane to have access to the combined resources of three large Universities each with large capacity in the crime and justice area.

The city of Brisbane at least since the Fitzgerald inquiry has borne witness to huge growth in crime and justice researchers and educators, such that we boast now one of the richest and well-resourced criminological communities in the world. Existing University based researchers combined with the research associates of the Foundation will be instrumental into the future as they contribute to expanding the existing evidence as well as materially shaping the crime and justice policy context for the State.

The launch of the TJ Ryan Foundation today presents us with an opportunity to forge ahead a new revolution in the area of crime and justice policy development. The Foundation provides a vehicle to drive new areas of innovation and reform and to counter the common-sense approach. The Foundation can provide an independent mechanism to foster knowledge transfer from researchers toward policy officers and practitioners, and that this is ultimately in the public interest. Additionally, the Foundation can be at the fore front of fostering respect for research evidence, at supporting bibliotherapy for public sector managers and leaders, at making evidence about scientifically supported programs accessible to practitioners, at building trust between researcher and practitioner communities and in fostering a shared commitment for effective social policy development and implementation for the State. And that my friends I would argue is in our collective interest.