

The Opposition Agenda



Elliot Tyler

'I am having to deal with chaos,' Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland complained back in September, 'thanks to a Labour Government passing, with incontinence, Criminal Justice Acts after Criminal Justice Acts.'

There are vastly conflicting visions from different parties for the struggling justice system, it is suggested by frank political comments. To shed some light on Her Majesty's Opposition's current position on criminal justice issues - including police brutality, high reoffending rates and the divides that exist between the police and public, and perhaps to settle the matter once and for all - interviews were arranged with Labour MPs Sarah Jones and Alex Cunningham. Both politicians have the role of scrutinising, appraising and criticising justice-related policies that are put forward by the Government. An interview with the Under-Secretary for the Courts was requested as well, but Chris Philp MP appeared to lack sufficient interest in the serious issues on the table.

Sarah Jones MP has been the Member of Parliament for Croydon Central since the 2017 general election, when she dramatically unseated the incumbent Conservative, Lord Barwell. She was appointed Shadow Housing Minister less than a year after her election to the Commons,

before a reshuffle that saw her become Shadow Minister for the Police and Fire Service. 'I've spent the last three years setting up and chairing the All-Party Group on Knife Crime,' she says, 'and there are underlying factors - poverty, ill health, bereavement, trauma, lack of access to services - which drive people into the criminal justice system.'



Sarah Jones MP: "It's been known for decades that there is deep disproportionality and discrimination across all parts of society."

In her own constituency, Sarah Jones attended a 'small and socially distanced' protest, taking the knee for George Floyd, whose life was taken by police in the United States in May last year, and Black university student Olaseni Lewis, who was killed in custody in 2010. 'In Croydon, we've had our own journey,' she says, 'with several high-profile cases of people who have been both the victims and the perpetrators of crime and a disproportionality that underlies discrimination throughout people's lives.' Black Lives Matter, commonly abbreviated to BLM, represents a stand against police brutality and racially motivated violence. 'The Black Lives Matter

movement is not a new phenomenon,' says Jones. 'It's been known for decades that there is deep disproportionality and discrimination across all parts of society.'

At the time of the interview, there were ten children in custody in Croydon. 'Of these ten children in custody, nine are Black. What got them to that point?' she asks. 'It's not dissimilar to the debate we're having over COVID, and why, if you're from a minority ethnic background, you are more likely to die. The poverty of the low-paid, frontline jobs that people are doing, as well as overcrowded housing and other matters, means more risk for these people.'

Alex Cunningham MP entered the House of Commons in the 2010 general election that saw the Conservative Party's first election win since 1992. He represents the safe Labour seat of Stockton North, a significant exports manufacturing and processing base. Under Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Cunningham was promoted to the front bench and currently serves as Shadow Minister for Courts and Sentencing. 'People are being trapped in a cycle of reoffending,' he says, 'and that's not good for them or the system.'

Across the country, demonstrations showing the significant divide between the people and the police have been occurring. Campaigners are saying that police officers are targeting and brutalising civilians, and the police have reported a 40% increase in police assaults in London. 'Any assault on a person is a

serious matter, but when it comes to police officers, and other people in public service, I think the courts have got to consider very carefully, when it comes to sentencing, whether or not there should be a harsher sentence passed in a situation,' says Cunningham. He has also campaigned for shop workers to receive similar legal protections, with recent measures imposed reportedly fuelling violence against retail workers. 'They have always been assaulted, and I think we need to make sure that the courts have sufficient powers to ensure that those performing a public service have proper protections, and to me that does include those working in a shop environment.'



Alex Cunningham MP: "People are being trapped in a cycle of re-offending and that's not good for them or the system."

The Lammy Review was an independent review of the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. Alex Cunningham recalls a quote from David Lammy MP, the Shadow Justice Secretary, recommending the introduction of a process by which former offenders could have their criminal records sealed. 'The person has paid their penalty, and after a reasonable time that information must be sealed,'

says Cunningham. 'It would improve the prospects of offenders who are seeking employment.' The specifics of the recommendation were that ex-offenders could have their case heard by an independent body, and criminal records could be sealed from employers.

'I think the Lammy Review took a look across the whole of the criminal justice system and identified things that should be done,' says Sarah Jones. 'Some of them might appear to be boring and technical, about things like data, but they are important. You can't understand where discrimination is unless you really get underneath the figures.' Will the review have any impact beyond the changes that have already been made? 'The Lammy Review has, hopefully, come back into the centre of the Government's priorities, and David Lammy is so credible and is happy to work cross-party to combat the issues.'

As of the end of 2020, a study suggested that the backlog of criminal cases yet to be dealt with by Crown Courts could quadruple by 2024. 'The criminal justice system is on its knees with the number of court cases that are waiting, huge delays in the system, and a Probation Service that was privatised and has now been brought back as a national service. There's overcrowding in prisons and a lack of rehabilitation. There's a whole structure that needs to be looked at and that's no small job,' says Jones. But she insists she'll be 'helping to drive' the changes that are needed.

Elliot Tyler is an undergraduate at Portsmouth University

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