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### Original Citation

Considine, Thomas (2011) The Newlove Report: a new opportunity or an obligation for communities to confront crime? *Criminal Justice Matters*, 86 (1). pp. 10-11. ISSN 0962-7251

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/13089/>

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## **CJM Article: The Newlove Report: a new opportunity or obligation for communities to confront crime?**

### **Proposal**

At a time when the cuts in public spending are making themselves felt in the criminal justice system and there are growing concerns raised about the ability of the police and local authorities to maintain civil order this article examines the timeliness and implication of the Newlove Report published in March this year. The Newlove Report offers a possible solution to the problem of reduced resources by invoking the much discussed concept of the 'Big Society' and advocating a change in the 'mindset' of the public in that they should take more responsibility in challenging crime rather than rely on the authorities. Whatever the potential benefits in this approach there are unacknowledged drawbacks, in particular the potential to blame communities for the crime in their area. This could extend the notion of victim blaming to those who are aware of crime but are perceived as not taking responsibility for it: namely witness blaming.

### **Introduction**

The publication of Baroness Newlove's report *Our vision for Safe and Active Communities* on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2011 arrives at the onset of an austerity drive in spending across the public sector, including the criminal justice system. The police are facing up to a 20% cut in their finances over the next five years which has resulted in an on-going debate about the police's ability to maintain law and order ( Casciani ,2011)

Baroness Newlove's report offers a possible solution to the concerns indicated by the above debate. The report advocates that communities and individuals should be encouraged and rewarded in playing a more central role in addressing crime and anti-social behaviour. Explicitly citing the phrase, 'big society' (p6), the report argues for a change in the public mindset : rather than looking to other authorities to address the local criminal problems , they should do it themselves. In effect the report implicitly suggests that the gaps left by a reduction in police resources can be plugged by the public.

In one sense this proposal is consistent with the 'responsibilization' agenda which has been a characteristic feature of criminal justice practice for almost thirty years (O'Malley, 1992). Within a neo liberal political framework individualised responses to crime have increasingly been promoted. One possible aspect of this is the potential legitimisation of vigilantism (Considine, 2011). However , in seeking to relocate the responsibility of tackling crime further on individuals and communities, the Newlove Report, if implemented, could open up the possibility of blaming communities for their own victimisation. Those who are witnesses to persistent acts of anti-social behaviour and criminal acts in their local vicinity but do take direct action could be held partly accountable for such behaviour. In effect, this could extend the notion of victim blaming to a new development: a form of witness blaming. and In effect it could extend the notion of victim blaming to witness blaming.

### **The Newlove Report**

Shortly after she was made a Baroness, Helen Newlove was appointed the government's Champion for Active Safer Communities and within six months had produced her findings. It is noted in the introduction that Baroness Newlove's interest in community safety springs from personal experience: in 2007 her husband, Garry Newlove, was fatally attacked near his family home by a group of youths who had been causing trouble in the neighbourhood on a persistent basis. It is noted that little was done by the authorities or the community previously but if they had been, her husband's death may have been averted.

In light of these experiences Baroness Newlove is, understandably, keen that this report does not simply 'gather dust' but becomes the basis for a policy change and practical action. The report draws upon seven examples of local community activities in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. From this several key recommendations are made as to how individuals and local groups and individuals can be supported and encouraged to tackle local problems. These are:

- *Community Reward*, which involves providing funding for initiatives which actually lead to a conviction.
- *Bling Back* a scheme which draws upon the argot of drug dealers which proposes the gains made through the illicit drug trade can, following their conviction, be re directed to the community following their conviction.
- Further developing the use of crime maps so the public can use them to report crime and ASB, and allow agencies to publish details of what action they had taken.
- Providing the public a single point of contact through the rollout of the 101, a dedicated number in order to report ASB.
- Proposing reductions in council tax or vouchers for those actively involved in crime reduction schemes.
- Working on the assumption that elected Police and Crime Commissioners will be created under the new Policing Bill. The report advocates that these officials should have the power to devote at least 1% of the police budget to grass roots community projects.
- Local communities should be given powers to set their own speed limit.

It is worth noting that four of the seven proposals above involve financial rewards. As well as promoting cash incentives for these proposals to become reality, they could also prove to be socially divisive. Just as it has been argued that widening social inequality is reflected in the way different communities can protect themselves from worsening crime (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), so the suggestions above may find a more responsive audience from those with the resources and capacity to implement them. In other words, those communities that have greater need to protect themselves from crime may struggle, without additional finances, to obtain the results that could generate further cash. It is argued, moreover, that those communities who act upon these new opportunities also have the chance to strengthen community ties, which is similar to that of the much fabled community spirit of the Second World War. Invoking stronger social ties is a compelling aspiration but likening it to a war time social spirit may have unintended consequences. It not only reinforces the notion of addressing crime as a military operation but presents the criminal as the foe to be defeated. It continues a prevalent view of a separate 'criminal' type against whom we are at war.

### **Opportunity or Responsibility?**

Overall the aim of the report is to create a 'generation shift' in which communities do not see crime as 'someone else's problem' but is owned and acted upon by the community itself. We are exhorted to "stop complaining about crime and how much agencies do, and do something about it [ourselves]" (p 6). For those who are "willing and able to intervene to challenge behaviour" then what is required is that they should do so "confident they will be supported by their neighbours, police, landlords, local council, ward councillors and their local MP" (P4). So, not only should we be asking less of our local authorities – which is useful in the face of financial cuts – but, as gaps open up in service provision they can be filled by local volunteers, with official support.

For those who are not "willing and able" to participate it is acknowledged that "we need to recognise that there is a proportion who are just not interested in getting involved, and that is their choice" (P8) but then goes on to say that "...being actively involved in your community and helping to keep it safe needs to become the norm rather than the exception" (ibid). Here lies one of the unacknowledged but implicit tensions in the Report. Although it recognises not everyone will want to get involved it suggests that this should be a minority response. It does not explore or consider the reasons why some would wish to exercise their option not to get involved. The implication here is that those who witness acts of anti-social behaviour and crime in their area but do not directly respond could be open to blame for their own plight. There could be very good reasons why people might be wary of taking up this offer to challenge crime. They could be mindful of the consequences should they intervene – such as the tragedy which befell Garry Newlove. Communities may lack a cohesive identity and some groups may feel less empowered to get involved.

### **Conclusion**

As the reality of the spending cuts become increasingly apparent and there are growing concerns about the resources to maintain law and order, the Newlove Report offers a potential solution, namely relocate the responsibility within the communities themselves. Such a move could plug potential gaps in the police and other agencies who offer protection. It could, moreover, offer a transformative approach to crime control in that the public do not just *work* with the police but *instead* of them. As such, the blame, as well as the responsibility, can be relocated to individuals and communities. Such an approach may further "..... downplay the role of other social factors and conditions in the creation of disorder, which may be more influenced by social policy – such as neighbourhood renewal or urban regeneration – than by criminal justice actions" (Hope 2009 op.cit. p55). Those groups least able to take up the proposed opportunities may well be the hardest hit in more ways than one.

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