

## Editorial

Prisons are at the centre not the heart of the present law and order "crisis". We make this careful distinction because it is in the nature of our prison system that heart, or any constructive approach to human relations, plays no part and there is certainly nothing in the present situation when the public mood, in line with the continuing economic and social crisis, becomes increasingly punitive and reactionary.

The past few years has seen the adoption of a policy of "alternative to prison" which has only placed more people in the claws of the criminal "justice" system what increasing the prison population. The present "crisis" (by no means the first nor, unfortunately, the last) comes in the wake of prison riots, allegations of administrative and psychiatric malpractice, industrial action by prison officers and, not least, a rapidly deteriorating faith in the ability of the penal system to deal effectively with crime. As instanced by the leader writers of almost all the national press, it is generally agreed that there is more wrong with the penal system than the poor pay and conditions of POA members. Yet it is now evident that, as in the similar "moral" crisis which last year faced the police, the current enquiry into the prison system will offer us no more than the diversionary and cosmetic palliative of action on the grievances of prison officers with, perhaps, a few consequent marginal changes. It is ironic then, that abolitionists and others calling for a radical re-appraisal of the penal and criminal justice systems remain a tiny minority. And so it is that this first issue of "The Abolitionist" appears when the going is at its roughest. Obviously, not a time for apology but for even greater commitment from us all.

RAP does not have a blueprint for the future but we do believe that our ideas about and approach towards antisocial behaviour (as opposed to "crime") are much more relevant and credible than the established logic which reflects and only serves to perpetuate an unequal and exploitative social system. It follows that we seek to remove such sentiments from the ephemeral regions they tend to inhabit and translate them into an effective force for social change.

Whilst RAP would argue that some fairly straightforward, though drastic, structural changes in society are essential components in this approach we are not suggesting emptying the prisons of their present occupants merely to replace them with another class of "miscreants" but, rather, RAP is looking to eradicate the concept of incarceration, and all that goes with it, from the thinking of our society. Thus it is not enough to consider changes of systems and administration but also our society's conception of these institutions and how they actually operate.

In this context, in this first issue of "The Abolitionist", we not only explain what work RAP and other similar groups are involved in and examine particular issues but we look at a recent study on the politics of the penal lobby which shows how the Home Office Prison Department greatly favours the Howard League for Penal Reform while, as we know only too well, it ignores or shuns RAP and its fundamental criticisms of the whole penal system. We look also at how, despite the potent failure of the penal system, societies unquestioning conception of crime and punishment enables powerful interest groups, in this case in the recent bogus election campaign, to strengthen that same bankrupt system.

In the struggle for change it is important to develop an overview by which the guage advances and setbacks, but the here and now is important too. The prison system will not settle down and quietly await the findings and recommendations of the present committee of enquiry - nor should it. The struggle should continue on all fronts and we have no doubt that on particular issues such as the abuse of

prisoners by drugging, the vexed issue of prison disciplinary procedures and the question of secrecy much can be achieved. We hope that "The Abolitionist" will play an important part in this process.