# Lessons from Norway

## Event transcript

Event transcript
Took place on November 7th, 2022

Centre

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## Event panel

**Lord Hanson**

*Minister of State in the Home Office*

David Hanson is the Minister of State in the Home Office and is a Member of the House of Lords. He was Labour Member of Parliament for Delyn for twenty-seven years and during this time held several ministerial positions.

**Chris Daw KC**

*Lawyer, author, and broadcaster*

Chris was the co-presenter of the BBC One series “Crime - Are We Tough Enough?” and is the author of the book “Justice on Trial."

**Cllr Lauren Davison**

*City Councillor*

Lauren is a Councillor in Stoke-on-Trent. She currently serves as National Secretary for Open Labour, previously held the role of Women and Equalities Officer for the Young Fabians, and holds a Masters degree in Criminology.

**Cllr Will Barber–Taylor**

*Former Deputy Director*

Will was our Deputy Director and now serves as a Councillor. He hosts the Debated Podcast and the Not A Day For Soundbites Podcast. Will was previously the Digital Campaigns & Media Officer for Generation Rent.

## About Centre

We are an independent non-profit foundation and cross-party think tank. Our mission is to rebuild the centre ground and to create a more centrist and moderate politics. We support better public services and a strong economy inspired by policies from the Nordic countries.

To achieve these goals, we work with people from across the UK and party politics. This includes engaging with politicians and our networks, which include academia, politics, and law.

Our work includes creating new conversations by hosting events and conducting interviews. We also produce new policy ideas to better inform debate, publish papers, and release articles. We aim to build consensus, shape public opinion, and work with policymakers to change policy.

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## Event summary

This discussion focused on why our justice system continues to rely on punishment rather than rehabilitation, and what lessons could be learned from a more humane and effective Norwegian model. Speakers argued that our punitive mindset, which is deeply embedded in politics and public attitudes, has failed to reduce crime or reoffending. In contrast, Norway's "reintegration guarantee" and evidence-based, welfare-oriented approach were cited as models for reform. Participants agreed that prison policy remains shaped by political populism and a media culture that rewards "tough on crime" rhetoric over long-term solutions.

The conversation explored key areas for reform, including early prevention, rehabilitation, employment training, and better support for prison staff. Lord Hanson emphasised community sentences, skills development, and linking training in prisons to real jobs, while Lauren Davison highlighted the cultural and economic differences underpinning Norway's success and the need to rebuild public trust. Both stressed the importance of treating prisoners as individuals capable of change, and of professionalising and valuing prison officers to deliver that change effectively.

There was broad agreement that political will and public education are essential to any shift towards a rehabilitative model. Chris Daw KC argued that reform must begin with pragmatic, evidence-led policies, such as drug law reform, to reduce prison numbers and redirect resources. All speakers agreed that meaningful change requires both societal and political courage: moving beyond short-term populism to a justice system focused on prevention, reintegration, and genuine crime reduction.

## Transcript

**Chris Daw KC:** That mindset, that retribution mindset, has essentially pervaded our justice policy. We exported that to the US, and the US went off and took it to even greater extremes. But I think sadly, we have never learned the lesson that the punitive approach, whilst it might have had some value a thousand years ago when life and societies were much simpler and binary kinds of decisions about good and evil, right and wrong, were maybe helpful in certain contexts. In a society like ours, a complex society with complex criminal issues, complex societal issues, sociological issues and economic issues, you simply cannot punish your way out of a crime problem.

I think that is the answer to the question. We essentially have the Anglo-Saxon world, if you like, that has adopted that mindset of punitive responses to every perceived wrong. And we have never really quite developed a better mindset. I am particularly impressed by the Norwegian commitment to what they call a reintegration guarantee, so that those who come out of custody are guaranteed access to housing, work and other support services. We do not do that. And by not doing that, people come out of prison, unsurprisingly, when they are unsupported and/or homeless and/or addicted and/or suffering from other mental health issues, they cannot reintegrate into society. And many of them just end up in the revolving door.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. And of course, the Anglo-Saxon system of justice was in many ways one that we would find quite strange now. If you go back over a few thousand years, ideas of trial by cake and combat and fire, something that certainly we would not have today. David, the same question to you. How do you think the UK ended up with both a dysfunctional prison system and high reoffending rates?

**Lord Hanson:** Like Chris, I would say that for me, there are three aspects to the criminal justice system.

First of all, prevention. How do we stop people from getting into the system in the first place when they first come on the agenda? Secondly, how do we punish people, which is part of the prison system and justice system? But equally, how do we reform, rehabilitate and reintegrate people into society? And like Chris has said, I think we have not focused on the first very much, which is prevention. We focused an awful lot on punishment, and we have not focused so much as we should be doing on reintegration, reform and rehabilitation.

And I think if we look particularly at the last time, when I was a justice minister, we put a white paper out at the time, which was headlined Punishment and Reform. It was about how we reform the system to ensure that people who have offended still have to account for their offending behaviour, but at the same time, we find a mechanism to ensure that those people are rehabilitated as far as we can. Most people come out of prison within 12 months; most people come out within two or three years.

We tackled some of the root cause problems that have brought them into the system in the first place, and we reintegrated them into society. And I think what has happened is that the sense of rehabilitation, reintegration, and reform has been shouted down by the sound of punishment. I think that we are jailing some people who should not be jailed, people for short sentences who go through the system, with 60% reoffending rates in the first year.

We are jailing people who potentially have mental health challenges, health challenges, or medical challenges. And what we should be trying to do is to look at what makes society safer. What we want to do is to use the justice system not just to punish, but also to make sure our society is safe and we reduce offending. And I think the balance is currently wrong. We can talk later about things that we have tried to do. I know Chris will agree that it is complicated. It is not easy. It is going to come up against a whole raft of challenges.

But ultimately, what the people I represented when I was a member of parliament wanted was just not to have crime, to have a safer society, and there are ways in which we can do that, which include prison, but which also maybe reforms and look at the different ways in which prison operates.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. The Norwegian approach to prisons has resulted in low reoffending rates and low crime rates. Why has the UK not moved towards this approach of reforming prisoners rather than focusing on punishment?

**Lauren Davison:** It is quite a multifaceted issue. I would say probably underlying it is, and this might surprise people, it is about the economic organisation of our countries being different. So there is quite a lot of research that says how you organise a country and an economy will influence the cultural values that they share. So Norway is far more collectivist. And all the research shows us that quite aggressively capitalist countries like the UK have more individualism and therefore less trust among the citizens.

So Norway puts a lot of emphasis on welfare, lots of universalism in their policy, and there is a far more caring approach to their governance. So as a result of that, there is a high degree of trust, and the people there are just far less, I would say, vengeful when they look at prisoners. So the general understanding is that people need to be helped if they are going to reform themselves. And trust, in this country, between the public and the government, thank you to the Conservative Party of the last 18 months, has completely torn up that trust. It is going to make things very difficult for us if we want to reform prisons because it is not as simple as just creating better justice policy and assuming people will vote for it.

If they do not trust the messenger, they are not going to trust the message that is being pushed, and it is difficult, I can imagine, to be a politician in this country who wants prison reform because you have got the media working against you. After all, there is a lot of sensationalisation, and anything remotely reform-oriented gets called soft in the tabloid press. So it is going to take politicians with a little bit more bravery and a little bit more legwork to get this over the line and get it sorted.

But progressives have not been perfect on that either. Even under Jeremy Corbyn, probably one of the most liberal Labour leaders that we have ever had, maybe our justice policy, our prison policy was not where it needed to be. So it has got a lot for everyone to do to counter this. And I think progressives need to be the ones pushing it forward.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. Chris, on the same question, why do you think the UK has not moved towards this approach of reforming prisoners rather than focusing on punishments? Do you think that Lauren has something there when she mentions the degree to which perhaps the media have played a part in this?

**Chris Daw KC:** I think it is all politics, frankly. I mean, the government David was in did many good things, but one of them was not reducing the use of prison as a form of punishment, and the mere fact that David so frequently used the word punishment and everybody almost takes it for granted that that is an ingredient of a functioning justice system tells you all you need to know.

It is very difficult for any politician, whether someone who has already been elected or someone who is standing for election, to stand on a platform of reducing imprisonment, particularly for offences that people consider require very long sentences. And the truth of it is that the public has not been taken on that journey. They have not been taken on that journey by Tony Blair, and understandably so. I mean, the truth is that Tony Blair won the election with such great success because he was populist and popular, and populism and popularity do not necessarily sit too well with a policy agenda which says we want to halve our prison population.

Most people said, “No, no, we think sentences are too short.” Well, the truth of it is that on average, sentences for most of the most serious crimes have doubled since I started in practice almost 30 years ago, including during the long period that the party David is in was in government. And right through that whole period, the prison population went up, the use of prison sentences and the length of prison sentences went up, and we now see a situation where we have well over 80,000 in prison as opposed to about 40,000 when I started. Yes, there has been population growth, but nothing like that.

I think that the core problem is politics. It is the same in the U.S., where, as part of my research for the book, I met an elected appellate judge, a criminal judge in Alabama. And he very frankly, in confidence, told me why all of the things that the system had was trying to do, like imprisoning people for very long periods, if not forever, and to imprison people even for minor drug offences for 20 years and suchlike, he was very clear that this is nonsense, it makes the whole thing worse.

So the obvious question is, why do you comply with that? Why do you not stand for election on a different platform? And he was very clear, because “I would never win, and I would not be a judge.: And I think the same applies to politicians in many regards, particularly those who have aspirations to be prime minister or cabinet ministers; they very much have to be seen to be ‘tough on crime’. And if not, then the media, social media, and of course political opponents will take huge advantage of that perception of softness.

I am not sure how you square the circle. I am not sure there is an answer because ultimately things only change from one direction or the other, do they not? They either change because of a public demand for something which politicians respond to, or politicians put forward a positive message that the public responds to, or both. And at the moment, I think a message that says, as I advocate, half the use of prison, legalise and license the supply of drugs, stop criminalising children as young as 10, which is bonkers when surely any rational person can see that that is not right and anyone who has ever met or known a 10-year-old knows. But you advocate these policies, and you just get shot down and you get accused of being soft, and it would take a very brave and very popular politician to be able to make any difference in this area.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** We have already touched upon the distinctions very briefly, the Norwegian prison system and the British prison system, the system in the UK. And I think, Lauren, in your response to the previous question, you touched upon part of why you think that there are those differences. Why do you think that the Norwegian prison system has had so much success in comparison to the UK?

**Lauren Davison:** I think the ethos in Norway is generally that if you treat people with respect as humans, in proper conditions, that is going to be far more conducive to their rehabilitation. And they take more of a long-term approach because they recognise that one day those prisoners will be released back into the community. So when they are, they will need help to adjust, but they also need help to desist from offending again. And I think the Norwegian public is generally more supportive of that in a way that British people perhaps are not.

And the British system is running in the short term, which is almost inevitable given the way the Tories have managed prisons for the last 12 years. So it is very hard to plan for the long term when you can only just about get by daily without some level of crisis. It is a crisis almost entirely of the Tories' making, but it is difficult for anyone really to sort out.

Rory Stewart, for instance, I feel like he understood the issues that were afoot, but there was not the will to change things in the Conservative Party because, on the face of it, a lot of Conservative justice policy relies on being visible and gimmicky, like the Rwanda policy or when Chris Grayling tried to ban books in prisons. There is little evidence that it is going to work, but they are very vocal about it because they are trying to appeal to their more reactionary populist voter base, which is how Chris was speaking about populism.

The reason Norway has generally done better is just because the ethos is there from the start, like it is a more consistent approach. They offer educational activities and opportunities for jobs in prisons. It gets people used to life outside of the prison. It stops them from becoming institutionalised. And they have the opportunity to learn new things and do things rather than just being warehoused like they are in the UK.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely, Chris, what are your thoughts on this? Why do you think that the Norwegian prison system has had so much success in comparison to the UK system?

**Chris Daw, KC:** Well, because it is evidence-based, and Norwegian policy is based on pragmatism. That, in some ways, is the major difference between the way that British politics works and American politics works, because we are very similar in many respects, and we are sadly drifting more towards that American populist model. But that is the reality.

Norway is a highly educated country, on average, on average more highly educated than the UK, and it is a country of much greater individual wealth on average than the UK. So when you put those things together, particularly with this liberal ethos that broadly lies behind Norwegian public life and policy, you end up with very different outcomes. I think the simple fact is that Norwegian politicians have been able to convince the voting public that a pragmatic approach to criminal justice reduces crime. And ultimately, as David said, that is what everybody should want.

The problem is that British people have not been taking on that journey by any politician to the point of accepting that a Norwegian style approach of heavy investment in individuals, in a system with focuses on their release and all the costs of that involves and much shorter sentences and much smaller use of prison generally is successful in reducing overall rates of crime and therefore the number of victims. If people understood and believed that, as I think people in Norway do, then I think people would vote for it. But they do not understand it, and they do not believe it. And hence, the Daily Mail every time there is any case where there is a concern about a level of sentence or someone being released, all of the headlines almost across the board, no matter what the political persuasion of the publication is, this is the judge being soft or the system does not work, rather than maybe the system needs to look at things differently. Pragmatism is the key.

The pragmatism in Switzerland now extends to drug policy and several other countries. They look at what works rather than an emotional response to things being bad. And it is only when you start to divorce policy from emotion and look at evidence that you can change.

Norway is the best example of an evidence-based approach to the use of imprisonment, an evidence-based approach to the cold criminal justice system. And since the 1990s, when they had much higher crime rates than they do now, they have seen this big reduction in criminality and a much smaller prison population than they had then.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** One of the ways that this has been done, particularly in terms of rehabilitation, has been training prisoners. So, David, how do you think we can best make the case for training prisoners and ensuring that they are ready for the world of work for the public, which, as we have touched upon and both Chris and Lauren have mentioned, may be perhaps sceptical of this idea, particularly given how the press might react to it.

**Lord Hanson:** I think employment is key, and helping to support people to do that.

Before I touch on that, we will just put a little bit of a defence in for the Labour government from 1997 to 2010. We increased the number of community sentences dramatically. We tried to encourage that. We tried to make them more visible. We tried to make them part of the community so people can see and understand that the community-based sentence was not a soft option. It was still an option that was helping with support and rehabilitation. We increased the number of drug treatment orders, alcohol treatment orders, and support for people who were dealing with, particularly women offenders, with the Corston Report that we commissioned to try to look at how we can reduce the number of women in prison. There was a lot of effort made. The Tony Blair slogan of 1997 was tough on crime, yes, but also tough on the causes of crime. So we were trying to identify through Sure Start, through a whole range of other mechanisms, how we prevent young people, particularly, from getting into the criminal justice system. In the first place, we put in new prevention orders. We did a whole range of policies like that, which were designed to try to show that we understand that people do not want crime, but we are also trying to look at some of the long-term root causes. And one of the things, going back to the employment issue, was to try to link employers in the community with people in prison.

I established, with the Timpson Group, the provision of the Timpson workshop in HMP Liverpool, which was the first real opportunity to get people who were guaranteed a job if they completed their time in prison, when they left prison to work for Timpsons. And now Timpson employs something like 65- 70 % of people who are former offenders. So what I think we now need to try to look at doing is, for a whole range of reasons, not least of which is Brexit, there are a whole range of skill shortages in our community, and there is a whole range of training opportunities. We should be using the prison system to try to encourage and look at what those skill shortages are, and match prisoners and prisons with long-term employment shortage needs. We have a whole range of things from agriculture through to transport, through to a whole range of things which are there, and look at how we meet those training needs for the future.

This is something we tried to press in government, which dropped off the edge in 2010, to look at how the power of government itself can employ people who have come out of the prison system. Local government and central government are among the biggest employers in the United Kingdom, if not the biggest employers in the United Kingdom. And it does not perform well in identifying support for people coming through the community, looking at skills and training. That is not just about what we have had in the past, which is people laying bricks or looking at electricity. It is about the whole purpose of how we can link people to have training and employment opportunities linked to real and meaningful jobs, not to certain courses that may or may not help them get employment later.

I think hopefully my other colleagues will agree, there are still many people going to prison who have basic difficulties with literacy and numeracy and with basic social skills for a whole range of reasons, parental background, employment opportunities, a whole range of things. We have to try to look at continuing to raise those basic levels of skills whilst people are with us. And it is going back to a people-centred approach.

I want something that looks at Will and says, “Will has shortcomings in these or these skills. Will has the potential to do something if he leaves us in two years. What do we do with Will in those two years to help tackle the problems that have brought him into us in the first place, but also prepare him or her for life outside in one, two or three years?” And that is what we should be trying to do. And there is a really good sell there, going back to what Chris has said earlier about saying to the public, this is a time that we have a custodial responsibility, but also a reforming responsibility for individuals. And in that time, we have to not just incarcerate, but we have to identify, suggest, improve, train and help to rehabilitate and reintegrate, and invest in that will ultimately cut crime when those people get out of prison.

**Chris Daw KC:** Sorry to interrupt you. David, can I ask you a question? Because I think this is the number one issue which you have identified. The things that you have described as the Norwegian model have demonstrated that they cost money. And I just wonder, how do you persuade your constituent if you are an MP or the public who are listening to political speeches, how do you persuade the public that we should invest, let us say, £100,000 in this person who is in prison at a time of rising unemployment and huge cuts across the public sector, is it possible politically possible to persuade the public to invest in offenders, in inverted commas, when we are so short of money in the public purse?

**Lord Hanson:** I think there is always an appetite in the communities that I represent to reduce crime. In some of the estates that I represented, there may be two or three offenders who continually offend, spend three to six months in prison, come out again, and offending goes up when those people are out. We have got to try to persuade people, and this is one of the things that we were trying to do, controversial though it was, with the visibility of community sentences. We are giving people a visible example of what is being branded as a community-based sentence to try to show people that investment in the individual, or investment in a non-prison sentence, or investment in employment opportunities, was a good thing.

But we can also persuade; we can do it silently and not visibly. We can do it by supporting people like Timpsons. Nobody outside of the criminal justice world walks into the Timpson Euston Station and thinks that person is a criminal or former criminal. But those chances are that there is a seven in 10 chance that they are a former offender. So we can do it by persuading businesses to take a liberal approach to employment. We can do it by persuading local authorities and housing associations to take a liberal approach to rehousing. We can do it by making the case for reducing crime by investing in people, because the people who are in the system are people who are going to walk around the streets in three years, in two years, how do we make them better? A justice reinvestment argument has to be made. People have an appetite for more policing. They should also have an appetite for more investment to reduce the need for more policing in the first place.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Lauren, turning to the question that I had originally put to David, how best do you think we can make that case for training prisoners and ensuring that they are ready for the world of work?

**Lauren Davison:** So I think it is really important that we know as well that the majority of prisoners are not on whole life sentences. So when they are released, we have to say to the public, "They are going to be released. So, what would you rather? Would you rather they were productive and helped to rejoin society?" Because we know a lot of prisoners come from marginalised demographics. We need to be prepared, as David said, to invest in people, because there are still barriers and there is still stigma against ex-offenders in the world of work that need to be addressed. Because if we are saying the punishment here is the custodial sentence, once you have served the sentence, within reason, obviously, some jobs would not be appropriate for certain offenders. There should not be a barrier to you getting a job.

If we want to start with an evidence-based approach, it helps if we have the evidence, we have case studies, we have the success stories that have worked, that we can highlight to the public and say, Look, this is what is going on. This is what we have invested in. It has worked. This pilot scheme has worked, for example. Timpson is a great example I was going to talk about as well, but I am glad David did. So it is the common-sense economic case for it. More people want to work as well. It is good for the economy and it is good for productivity, but it is also about seeing how work is a protective factor in rehabilitation, because helping someone into the world of work, as the research shows us, will hopefully make it less likely for them to return to crime. It is all about breaking the cycle and helping people end the conditions that contributed to their offending behaviour to begin with, whether that is poverty or homelessness. So it is helping people get that training, get those skills, build up their self-esteem, because that is important as well, and bring them back into mainstream society and hopefully help them stay there as well.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. I would like to move on now. We have talked about prisoners within the system, but I would like to turn to prison staff. One of the largest differences between Norway and the UK is how we value and train prison staff. Is there a way for the UK to better train and support staff working in prisons? David, what do you think?

**Lord Hanson:** I think we have got to look at this as a whole. If we talk to the public about prison staff, people will think of the porridge-type warder. What we have to look at really is the whole team. Some people are involved in education, in healthcare, in policing, in inverted commas, the cell regime. And we have got to look at raising the standard of that and supporting those people, making sure they feel valued, making sure they feel well paid and making sure that they have a proper career structure.

This is a bit political, apologies for this, we have lost 40 % of frontline staff in prisons in the last 12 years. That has a real impact on the ability of an individual member of staff to relate to a person who is in their care and responsibility sphere when that person is in prison. If you have somebody who is working with 25 or 30 offenders in prison, as opposed to five or six. That makes a big difference in terms of understanding the quality and the support that they can give. So I have always argued when I was in Parliament as a minister but also in opposition that we have to invest in the staff because the staff are the people who deliver the services to the people that are in our care, and we have a responsibility to return to society in a better place than they were when they came to us.

So now, ensuring that there is continuous training, ensuring that there is continuous support, ensuring that the people themselves feel valued, and ensuring that they feel well paid is part of the prison investment that we need. I am sure Chris will back this up. But one of the easiest targets to make for a government in the current spending round, next time round, will be to cut the amount of money spent on the Ministry of Justice. Most of the members of the public do not see the interface between the Ministry of Justice and their daily lives. They will feel it in their health. They will feel it on transport. They will feel it in potentially areas of local government support. They will not necessarily feel it in terms of the Ministry of Justice immediately, although in due course, by goodness me, they will.

In 2010, a 40 % cut in the Ministry of Justice in year one of the then coalition government made a really big difference, and the government now had to roll back on over time because it felt that it could not maintain the buildings, could not maintain the staff, could not maintain the offending reduction regime, and they had to recalibrate that. So I think the staff are the people who deliver the service, and you have to invest in them. They are training their support and making them feel valued because they are the first person that comes into contact with the system that we are trying to improve.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. Lauren, on the same question. Do you think that there is a way for the UK to better train and support staff working in prisons?

**Lauren Davison:** I think for a start there needs to be the recognition that a prison officer is seen up there as a highly skilled job on par with policing or social work because quite often a lot of people do not see them on the same level and when you consider they are responsible for the day-to-day care of the prisoners they have to do all of these jobs rolled into one. It is a difficult job that many people do not give the right amount of credit for. I think, as I wrote in my paper, the difference between our prison staff and in Norway is that in Norway, they have to do a degree level amount of training where they learn the physical, the theoretical side of the job, but they are trained in a variety of disciplines like criminology, how to deal with interpersonal issues, social work, mental health support. If you compare that to British prisons, especially private prisons, which do not get the same level of training.

Often, we are deploying our prison officers into some very complex, distressing situations that they have not had adequate training for. They have not been given the tools to build the resilience they need to do that job. So it must be quite stressful for them. And we are losing so many through cuts, and there is also a high rate of attrition with people dropping out.

Potentially professionalising the job, allowing them to do more training and a higher level of qualification to ensure that they are better equipped to handle things. I know various prison reform charities want to see maybe a conversion course for, let us say, criminology students; they could do a year-long course that would qualify them to work in prisons, but it is changing the nature of the job. So it is not just a job you can kind of fall into. It is a vocation. It is a highly valued job. I think there needs to be that distinction from how it is currently, because it is not being valued as it should be.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. Do we think, then, finally, that there is a path to changing both public opinion and party policy towards reforming prisoners, and how would we do that? Chris, what do you think?

**Chris Daw KC:** I think it arises from the last point. The truth of it is, as David pointed out, that justice suffered the largest cuts of all in percentage terms in the austerity round, in the George Osborne austerity round back in 2010, and the prison system is massively overcrowded in terms of the number of prisoners and massively understaffed in terms of the number of staff. The problem is that we are starting from a position where there has already been a huge underinvestment in the system over a very long period, just at the time when the government is looking for yet more austerity cuts and more cuts in public expenditure. And one suspects, as I think David was alluding to, that the current chancellor will find it easier to make those cuts, albeit that the justice budget is tiny compared to the other budgets in the public sector, particularly health, education and so forth. It is a relatively tiny budget, but it is just very easy to salami slice justice and to show that we have saved a billion or two or three as part of the total. And I fear that we are going to see things get worse long before they get better, if they ever get better. The irony of that, where they have ended up in the US, a country that supposedly hates taxes, and supposedly is in favour of individual liberty, they have a prison population of two and a half million, and it costs trillions of dollars a year in taxpayer money to service that system.

So I am afraid I just do not see in policy terms, I see no evidence at all of anyone doing the one thing that I think that you could do to kind of deal with some of those crucial issues, which are overcrowded prisons and understaffed prisons. And for me, the number one policy initiative will be a reform of our drug laws because a huge percentage of people are in prison either because of drug addiction or committing drug-related crime or directly. After all, they have committed a drug crime of some sort, including drug supply. If you take the drugs out of the criminal justice system and put them into a health and welfare system, then you have the opportunity to dramatically reduce the prison population, dramatically reduce the harms that come from the prohibition of drugs in health terms, in organised crime and all the other things.

And if we were to buy that mechanism, reduce the prison population by say 20 or 30 % over a five-year period, which is, but by no means, unachievable, then you do not need to spend more because suddenly you have fewer people to service in the system. So the overcrowding goes, and the understaffing becomes less significant. But ultimately, the million-dollar question is, are we prepared to invest? We know that it costs, and Lauren will confirm the up-to-date figure, but it costs over £100,000 a year to keep someone in a Norwegian prison. Our average spend is about £45,000 across the system. That is a big gap. And the reason for that additional spending is that the staff ratio in Norwegian prisons is two or three times higher than ours. So that ability to interact individually with prisoners, as Lauren described, the professionalism of the staff, which of course means more money on the training and higher salaries, are we willing to do that?

These are the political issues and the economic issues we have to wrestle with as a country. Sadly, as somebody who is not a politician but somebody who works within the criminal justice system and observes and thinks about it carefully, I see no evidence of movement in the right direction. If you listen to anything Suella Braverman says, and she is the current home secretary, sadly, it is remarkable that she has achieved that position. But the Home Secretary of our country is doing nothing but soundbites, advocating more of the same or worse. So I just see no direction of travel, sadly, in policy terms, in the right direction.

Reform of drugs and drug law would be the one policy initiative you could take which would dramatically reduce the size and impact of the criminal justice system, improve lives and reduce harms. And so for me, if you are to do something, maybe you could persuade the public, you could take them on a journey in that direction. I think it is easier to do that than just say we want to spend £100,000 a year per person, which is what it would take to have a normal Norwegian model of incarceration.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** David, do you think that there is a path to changing both public opinion and party policy towards reforming prisoners?

**Lord Hanson:** I think the one thing you have to try and do is that any government that is elected in one or two years will have crime and reduction of crime at the heart of the manifesto. And from my perspective as a Labour Party member, I would want the Labour government to be looking not just at how we police and provide support for policing in our society, but how we actually have a long-term plan to reduce crime. And one of the things that we are looking at is certainly the potential to look at the issues that Chris has done about a royal commission to get some discussion around that, which is fine but I think we can certainly do some things in the very short term, which is, for example, look at the people who are in prison for under 12 months. How do we find alternative-based sentences for those people who are going to prison for under 12 months? How do we begin to increase again drug and alcohol treatment orders? How do we support people in the community with community-based penalties to get people out of prison?

We can reduce that, and we can make better, in my view, use of the resource that is going into people on short-term prison sentences by transferring that with a political will into short-term community-based sentences or short-term treatment orders and treatment sentences, which will help, in my view, turn around our society, in the people who are going through prison, and the 60 % reoffending rate we have for people sentenced to under 12 months.

A major push also on the areas we have touched on earlier, which I think can be done with political will, which the public may not even notice, on employment, on health investment into prisons. That is a real chance to turn around lives and to make this Through the Gate experience a much more positive thing. Now it does take money, it does take effort, but ultimately that is an internal government argument that ministers can make to the treasury with the support of Number 10, which we have had to do as ministers in the past to put investment into certain areas.

The public question is, how do we reduce crime? Internally, that is where that argument lies. And the points that Chris has made are about how a minister like me, the Ministry of Justice, with the support of the Secretary of State, can bring people around a table who are responsible in government for health, for education, for employment, and make a collective case together to the Treasury and Number 10 to put resources into this area.

Ultimately, it will achieve our ultimate aim, which is to reduce crime and make people feel safer. Going back to the points that we have really skirted around, any government has to say we are going to try to reduce crime, and any government is judged on how it reduces crime and whether it has reduced crime. But I think the internal arguments are sometimes the things that we can do in the government, and take the case to the public as opposed to getting permission from the public first of all to do those things.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. We have now come to the Question and Answer section of this event, as Torrin has put in the chat, if anybody wants to ask a question then you can either pop it in the chat or if you want to ask the question in person rather than me reading it out just raise your hand and Torrin will unmute you and you will be able to ask your question. So, is there anyone who would like to go first? I think, Torrin, you do have a question that you wanted to ask, don't you?

**Torrin Wilkins:** My question was mainly around the Norwegian, and I suppose more generally, the Nordic welfare systems. A lot of the conversation around prisons ends up focusing on the experience of someone in prison training for work afterwards, but rarely on what David said about preventing people from going to prison in the first place and also making sure that there are those safety nets. So, how much is that a factor? The UK, for instance, could go, and it could almost replicate the Norwegian prison system without replicating the rest of that system of welfare and everything else. So, how much of a difference do you think that specific element of welfare support and everything else make to that system?

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Who would like to answer first?

**Lord Hanson:** I would argue, Torrin and Will, things like Sure Start, things like investment in early years education, things like identifying individuals who potentially have challenges in their early years and putting some investment in to turn those individuals around at that stage is equally as important as what we do with people if they are 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18 into the prison system and justice system.

So there is a real need for community investment in employment, housing, social projects and life opportunities, which will help, I think, reduce the potential for criminal behaviour at a later stage in life. And that should go hand in hand, and the Norwegians have invested for many years in that. I would argue that the Labour government between 97 and certainly 2005, 2006, tried to do that through a whole range of social measures, which had moderate success, I think. But we need to put those two things hand in hand. It is not just about the consequences of criminal offending behaviour and what we do with people when they come into the system. It is about preventing people from going into the system in the first place. And there are several mechanisms that a good social welfare society should be able to undertake to prevent people from going into the system as far as we can. Not being naive about it, but we can still do that, and we can still make a difference in the percentage of individuals.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. Chris, would you like to come to this question as well?

**Chris Daw KC:** I think that anyone who has read my book knows I advocate a much more radical approach to that, which is that we should take all children out of the criminal justice system completely, as they have done in several countries. And the reason for that, I think, is obvious on two fronts. One is when you criminalise a child as young as 10, and admittedly, it is uncommon to have 10-year-olds prosecuted, but it does happen. But certainly much more common to see 12, 13 and 14-year-olds taken to the youth court. Some of them have even been given custodial terms of one kind or another. When you do that, you create a criminal for life.

I did youth court work as a young criminal defence lawyer. And once people have, they do not see the criminal justice system as something to be afraid of. It just becomes their life. It is the same as if you treat a 12 or 13-year-old in any walk of life; if you educate them well, then the chances are you will give them a good chance in life. If you look after their health and their mental health, the chances are those things will survive into later life. But if you treat them and you label them as the criminal, you give them a criminal record, which does not even get expunged, as they would call it in America, at the age of 18 in this country, it remains forever on their criminal record, never goes away. Just think about that, if that is another area of policy, again, anyone who has read the book will know that I am in favour of very radical approaches because when you accept the status quo but look to tinker around the edges, the problem is that there was a huge good intention.

Nothing I have said about the Labour government should be taken as a criticism of the intention. The problem is the outcomes. The outcome was that we had a much higher prison population in 2010 than we did in 1997. And we did not significantly reform our criminal justice system during that whole 13-year period. And for me, that was a lost opportunity because we had a government that was broadly speaking sympathetic to reform, but sadly, the outcomes at the end of it all were not favourable. We did not see a reduction in prison sentences, and we did not see the sorts of reforms that I am talking about. And we did see lots of children, still thousands a year going through the criminal justice system.

Some of these fundamental, radical reforms are the only way you turn the system at a time of pressure on resources, because we cannot ignore the fact that they are, to coin a phrase, I think of a former chancellor or chief secretary of the treasury, there is no money left. We have spent it all. If we are gonna look for reforms, I think we need to look for reforms that are either cost-neutral or save money. If you make the argument, one thing I disagree with David about, I do not think criminal justice policy has ever been the centre of a manifesto. The truth of it is, it is the economy, it is health and education. It is those three things that are fundamentally driving political debate and political policy, particularly at times of crisis, as we have at the moment. And that is why criminal justice has never really got the attention it needs, except when right-wing politicians argue for ever higher sentences, which is what Priti Patel and Boris Johnson did in 2019.

**Lord Hanson:** I think tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime was quite a straightforward manifesto commitment in 1997.

**Chris Daw KC:** But if you analyse it, David, the problem is what does tough on crime mean? It means more sentences, and keeps sending people to prison for more.

**Lord Hanson:** I think I was trying to say, this is going back to the argument, how do you win the argument? Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. I was trying to say we understand that crime is a problem in your community. I am not going to just avoid that, but we are going to try to tackle some of the causes of crime and help to change behaviour. There are many criticisms against us, but we did try to do that.

**Chris Daw KC:** The social policy, no disagreement, but the very fact that you have to use the phrase tough on crime, as for me, the only thing it could mean is we are going to be tough on criminals, we are going to give more sentences, we are going to crack down.

**Lord Hanson:** I disagree, but tough on crime allows you to be dealing with the issues of rehabilitation, to deal with reinvestments in those issues. I think it does because it says to people, We understand that crime is a problem in your community, and we are going to try and tackle it. So we are going to try and tackle it by tackling the causes of crime as well, and that will get that permission through. That is what we try to do on a range of issues, and we have had some success. We also modernised the prison system; we decommissioned 10 or 11 prisons because a broken-window prison is not a good place to be. We have to put investments into the estate as well as into the people.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** As worthwhile as a discussion of the 1997 manifesto is, we do have a couple of other extra questions that I would like to get your responses to. Joseph asked, outside of Centre Think Tank, what organisations and charities are campaigning effectively for Norwegian-style prison reforms? Lauren, do you know of organisations that are doing this?

**Lauren Davison:** So, whether or not I think they explicitly say it, as "We are copying the Norway model, we want to copy the Norway model." There are lots of other charities and organisations that look at it from evidence that use a harm-reduction-based approach. So I think good starting points would be like the Prison Reform Trust, the Howard League for Penal Reform. Those are the two that I looked at when I was doing a lot of the research. I am sure there are lots more that are using the explicit Norwegian model as a kind of starting point. But those are the two that I looked at most for inspiration.

**Chris Daw KC:** I mean, think there are admirable organisations that have been around a very long time, the Prison Reform Trust and the Howard League for Penal Reform. And the difficulty is, it is no criticism of those organisations, that what they are largely trying to do is to advocate reform of the current system, rather than ripping up the system and saying, actually, "We are doing everything wrong." The whole system is just driving more crime. It is almost like an industry, and I could not create a better industry for increasing levels of crime than our current criminal justice and prison system. So tinkering at the edges and saying, let us improve this, let us improve that.

I mean, the point that Torrin made about that if we moved over to the Norwegian model, we could not because our prison population is simply so stratospherically large in comparison to the Norwegian prison system that the cost of imprisoning everyone in the Norwegian conditions, it would cost tens of billions and no one is ever going to find that money right now, so the only way through it is to cut the numbers in the system, then you can start to invest and you start to see a bit of opportunity. Also, if you cut the numbers in the system in the way that I advocate with reform of children's justice and drug crime in particular, and getting away from this idea of just punishment for the sake of punishment, if you do those reforms, what will happen is what is happening in other countries, Norway being one example.

I also mentioned Switzerland's drug policy. When the public sees that the reforms that they were not sure about, like the liberalisation of drugs, like in Switzerland, they give free heroin to heroin users. Now, I tried to advocate that. Good luck to David, trying to stand on the platform saying, "I am going to give heroin for free to every heroin user." But they do that in Switzerland as a matter of basic human rights. Their human rights recognise addiction in the same way as any other disability, whereas the Equality Act specifically excludes addiction from the rights of disability. And we have the exact opposite approach. In the Swiss Supreme Court, they decided that addiction is a disability and those who are addicted are entitled to a full range of medical support and health, including access to pharmaceutical heroin twice a day. What has happened is a massive reduction in drug-related or heroin-related crime. And the public has gone: "This is great. We love it. Let us have more and more of this", but only because they have seen it work.

You have to do something, make it work. This is the point I think that David was making: if a government internally and politically can have demonstrably successful policies, then you take it to the public and you say, We want you to back us and here is how it works. The problem is that the direction of travel is all the other way with our current government, completely the opposite direction.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely, we have another question here from Rebecca, which is quite interesting in relation to the size of the prison population in the UK. Rebecca asks, How do we educate the public and government to realise that prison does not work? Not only do we have the highest prison population in Western Europe, but we also have the highest levels of prison mortality. And this has a massive ripple effect on staff, bereaved families and society. Who would like to go first?

**Lord Hanson:** Again, I would argue for Rebecca that we should be trying to reduce the number of people who go to prison for under 12 months, certainly. And that should be a policy objective of the future government. To do that, we need to invest in alternatives to the criminal justice approach with prison. And that is a theme that I have tried to put forward here today. And there would be a great number of third-party organisations in the criminal justice system that would also argue for that. I went to prison, and somebody was there, and I said, What is happening when you go out? They said, "I do not know, my life is in the skip." Because of 12 weeks in prison, they have lost the flat that they had, all their belongings have gone, and there is no family connection. If anybody has employment, they have lost that employment. They are potentially going back to the same cohorts of people they were with before, but with less economic value and less challenge.

We have to find a way to reduce or end, or impose a short-term prison sentence. And to do it, that takes a political will. We tried that in 2008, 2009, and 2010. We have got to try it again and we have got to keep focused on a five-year parliament, whatever else we do with the points Chris made, to say that there is no scope or benefit to society by having short-term prison sentences where people go through a revolving door without time to have alcohol, drug, other mental health treatments, and to put people in for 12, 15 weeks to find that at the end of the day, their life is just gone when they come out. So that can be a really important political objective to reduce the number of people in prison and to reduce the way in which prison approaches the under-12-month sentence.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** We do have one more question, but I know that you have to go in an hour, David. So if you need to go now, that is perfectly fine. There is just one more question to ask. Luke has our final question, which is: "Why is the UK so adamantly against drug reform? It seems that many Western countries, parts of the US and European countries are moving away from entirely prohibition models, but the UK is entrenched in a set of views. Even welfare interventions that have been around since the 1990s in Norway, such as public safe injection rooms, seem impossible to implement in the UK." Chris, I am sure you would like to cover first on this.

**Chris Daw KC:** Well, I think the answer is, it is about public perception and it is about the messaging that comes from politicians, more generally. The accepted wisdom, if you like, in society, which is that drugs are morally wrong in some way and that anyone who, and of course. I made a speech recently, and a criminal barrister and prosecuto, stood up and, in all seriousnes,s said to me, Drugs are morally wrong, but not this Bordeaux that I am enjoying and not this big fat cigar that I am smoking,whicht is perfectly reasonable because I am in control of those things and I am not harming anyone by doing that. And that, in a nutshell, summarises the problem, that the idea that because one set of chemicals was prescribed in 1971, it takes on some moral quality or immoral quality, whereas other substances, which are equally and indeed in many cases more dangerous, such as alcohol and nicotine, are legal, creates a moral distinction between the two.

I think the truth of it is that we have, since the early 1970s, when the misuse of drugs came in, we have just accepted as a society that, ironically, given the high levels of drug use, but at least in public, most people would describe drugs as being wrong in some way and something that needs to be deterred. Reality is, you cannot stop people from taking drugs. No one has ever been able to stop people from taking drugs since time began, literally since time began.

The answer is in terms of drug policy, if we are dipping our little toe in the water of heroin-assisted treatment and Middlesbrough and Glasgow. There are very, very small programmes which mirror the programmes that exist across Switzerland, which are essentially that twice a day heroin users go to a clinic, they are given pharmaceutical-grade heroin once in the morning, once in the afternoon or early evening, and for the rest of day they go to work or they go to college and what they do not do is burgle houses or sell their bodies because they need to raise £200 a day to buy heroin.

The interesting factor behind that policy is that it came in not because some charismatic politician said, “I have got this great idea, let us give away free heroin.” It came in because there were needles and active open heroin use in public in Switzerland, in Geneva, Zurich and other cities. And the public said, We want this problem off the streets. So the local government and local politicians took it off the streets into heroin-assisted treatment programmes and into what are called consumption rooms or shooting galleries, so that suddenly the public saw the benefit of a more pragmatic health-based approach to heroin use in particular. And now you will not see a railway station full of heroin addicts lying on the floor. You will not see needles in public parks where children play. And there are many parts of the UK where, sadly, drug use does lead to very significant disruption in communities and even harms, criminal harms, robberies and burglaries and so on.

I think if you could reduce all of those things by a pragmatic approach, we just need to invest in it, and in the short term, you will see huge returns. When you open a heroin-assisted treatment programme, the cost of it is not that high because heroin is very cheap to buy when the government buys it as pharmaceutical heroin, but you suddenly see a huge decline in property crime and other forms of crime and around in communities that are heavily afflicted by heroin issues. Lo and behold, you do something that works, and the people will support it as they have done in Switzerland. The more you invest in these programmes, the more you demonstrate that they work, the more likely the public will get behind them. And then you see the benefit that comes from a pragmatic approach to drug policy.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Lauren, would you like to come in next?

**Lauren Davison:** Yeah, just quickly. I am a Labour Party member, so I have looked at the recommendations made by the Labour Campaign for Drug Policy Reform, and they have done some really good work. Countries like Portugal have gone even further than just your basic diversion schemes, because you might remember Sadiq Khan suggested a cannabis diversion scheme in London, and the media and even some of the Labour Party just slated him because they thought he was trying to decriminalise things.

There is a real misunderstanding between the differences between legalisation, diversion, and decriminalisation. So it is educating the public to understand the differences. And then you have countries like Portugal, which have gone even further; they have legalised drugs. And as Chris was saying, when you do these kinds of schemes, you end up driving down crime rates, you can drive down HIV rates, you can improve general health, just by having a public health approach, the way you deal with drugs.

In some cases, it has reduced the usage of some drugs as well. So, rather than taking a prohibitionist approach, you have done what you have set out to do by making drugs and not slapping massive sentences on those who possess drugs. So, there is a lot to think about, but politicians need to start thinking outside the box, I think, because lives are depending on it.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Absolutely. I think we will end it there. We have gone a little bit over time. I would like to thank all our panellists, David, Chris and Lauren. If people want to find out more about you, could you say where they can find you online, follow you on Twitter, or visit your website, that kind of thing? David, where can people find you?

**Lord Hanson:** I am on Twitter @RTHondavehanson. I lost my blue tick a while back. Lost my seat, so I have a new Twitter handle now.

**Chris Daw KC:** So I am at @CrimLawUK on Twitter, I also have a YouTube channel, ChrisDawKC, which has lots of material for law students and people who are interested in legal careers, as well as some of the policy stuff, and they can read my book Justice on Trial, which is just behind me.

**Lauren Davison:** Twitter is probably easiest, so mine is @LaurenD2212.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Fantastic. Thank you once again to everybody who has come and watched the event, and thanks again to all our panellists. I hope you will enjoy the next event. Thanks once again, everyone.

**Chris Daw KC:** Thanks, Will. Well done, good presentation.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Thank you.

**Chris Daw KC:** Take care, everyone.

**Will Barber–Taylor:** Take care.

**Note:** This event has been edited for grammar, clarity, and flow. The original recording is the final and definitive version.

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## Transcript uploaded

October 19th, 2025

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