

GOVERNMENT AND LAW MAKERS



A Government's job is to govern – and a crucial part of that is determining how to deal with law and order.

In Medieval and most of Early Modern times, it was the King or Queen who was responsible for the Law. It was their job literally to “keep the peace”. In the 13th Century King Henry codified a lot of England's laws – meaning he made them the same throughout the country. Before that, there had been wide regional variations.

After the Civil War in 1649, Parliament took control of the country and became responsible for law and order. It has been the same ever since.

Within Government, the task of dealing with crime and punishment falls to the Home Office. This is why it was the Home Secretary in 1829 – Sir Robert Peel – who set up the Metropolitan Police Force. Today the Home Office is responsible not only for the police but also for prisons, the probation service, crime, courts and counter-terrorism. Governments decide what is a crime and what is not, albeit with advice from other significant groups.

Bishops, for example, were always consulted on laws in the Middle Ages, because religion was so vital to the whole concept of punishment and the king needed to keep them on side. In Early Modern Britain, laws became increasingly harsh as the wealthy government members tried to protect themselves and property.

And in Industrial times, it was the Government which decided to abandon the policy of Transportation and focus on sending criminals to prison.

It is also the job of the Government to ensure the criminal justice system meets the needs of the people that it governs. If a new crime appears, or an old one in a new form, such as identity theft, for example, law-makers may introduce new laws to tackle it. Whatever the Government does, however, will also be influenced by its own political beliefs and agenda.



MEDIA



Where do people get their information from? For you, it's probably social media. Older people may turn on the television or radio or maybe pick up a newspaper.

These are relatively new, of course. Social media is only slightly older than you, television came in around the 1950s and radios date from the 1920s. The oldest English newspaper started in the 1660s, but it was very small scale – after all, at that time hardly anyone could read! But pictures? That's a different thing entirely. Publications quickly discovered that crime sells, and nothing boost sales like a great illustration of a wicked crime on your front page. It was the beginning of a relationship that still exists today.

Highwaymen were the first media stars, with pamphlets detailing their dastardly crimes as far back as 1605. One hundred and sixty years later, The London Illustrated News saw sales rocket when it splashed gory illustrations of the Ripper murders all over its front page. Today, TV listings are packed with detective dramas and True Crime documentaries. Even podcasts have got in on the act.

But this relationship between media and crime is complicated. The extensive coverage means people think crime is far more widespread or violent than it actually is. Murder figures, for example, are far lower than people realise.

Technological advances have further complicated things with social media producing a wave of amateur detectives who, armed only with their phones, set out to “solve the crime” – something which is proving a real headache for the police.

Of course, there are times when technological advances can be helpful in fighting crime. CCTV footage has been successfully used to catch all types of criminals from shoplifters to terrorists. It will be interesting to what impact the development of Artificial Intelligence will have on the situation.