An Australian Perspective

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One of the underlying themes of this conference is ‘crime prevention at the cross-roads’ and the point made in the keynote address—that most western societies, including Australia, have reached a turning point in ways we must deal with crime—is to be strongly endorsed.

For many decades, Australia has tended to rely exclusively on what might be termed criminal justice reactions: more police, heavier sentences (particularly for more serious crimes), and expanded prison and correctional programs. Australia’s current annual investment in law enforcement alone has been estimated at well over $2 billion. Yet despite this, rates of crime—particularly property offences—have continued to escalate since World War II. These trends have been maintained in every state and territory and have had no regard for the ideologies of governments in power. Nor do these trends seem to have borne any relationship to amounts being expended on criminal justice.

South Australia, for example, boasts more police per capita than any other state and in recent years has consistently devoted more resources to police, courts of criminal jurisdiction, and corrections than the national grants commission standard. Yet crime rates have continued to climb in much the same way as other states. Clearly, Australians must (and in many instances have) become aware of the need to find new ways to deal with crime.

The purpose of this conference is to review new approaches and exchange information about progress already made along new paths. Perhaps Australia is already beginning to see elements emerging of a new national consensus on crime prevention: a consensus which does not ignore police and other criminal justice contributions but which sees the need to go further. Additional evidence of this consensus will, no doubt, emerge during proceedings themselves, when participants review state perspectives, and when the various workshops and papers explain and analyse practical ways crime prevention is being applied at local and regional levels.

As participants work through examples—from Gosnells in the West, to New South Wales’ Waverly-Fairfield initiative, to Victoria’s Good Neighbourhood Project and South Australia’s plans for the Noarlunga region—many common themes will be discovered. Themes such as the need for more accurate analysis and mapping of crime and for better ways of
sharing such information with local communities to forge effective prevention partnerships. Hopefully, those at the forefront of crime prevention in this country will be reassured not just that their work is valuable but that when they do encounter problems they are not alone: others are moving in similar directions and may have already devised solutions.

Establishing contacts and exchanging information will be one of the great gains from this conference. Another will be knowledge about how our work compares with international trends. In this context, the Keynote Address (pp. 1-6 of this volume) and the address on New Zealand developments in crime prevention (pp. 15-27) are particularly significant.

In August 1990, the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders (United Nations 1991) passed a comprehensive resolution on preventing urban crime. In the preamble to that resolution, congress delegates from over 140 nations unanimously expressed their conviction:

That a successful program to reduce crime cannot be based solely on the police and criminal justice system and that it must be matched by an active prevention policy which includes means of reinforcing common values so that personal and community responsibility regarding crime is acknowledged, as well as social and community development (programs) and the reduction of opportunities for offending.

This reflects the importance of:

- traditional methods; and
- prevention policy: in particular, designing out crime and thereby reducing opportunity, and reinforcing common values of personal and community responsibility.

The resolution also went on to emphasise the importance of institutions in society and the role of citizens. It noted:

That it is the task of government and other sectors of society to facilitate the development of local and national prevention programs, that prevention must bring together those with responsibility for planning and development, for the family, health, employment and training, housing, social services, leisure activities, schools, the police and the justice system, in order to deal with the conditions that generate crime.

A number of countries with whom Australia would feel familiar-including England, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, New Zealand, Belgium and Germany-as well as countries with whom we trade significantly-like Japan, and countries who were previously included in the Eastern Bloc-spoke with one voice in supporting this resolution. The sentiments which underline their unambiguous consensus support through this resolution on preventing urban crime, were that:

- the community has an important role to play;
- just spending money on the criminal justice system is not on its own going to be effective; and
no matter how much is spent on law enforcement or how rapidly courts commit offenders to prison, crime will continue to grow unless complementary prevention policies are adopted.

All governments are developing similar programs, and leading legal thinkers, policy analysts, law makers and police are marching to the same tune.

An annex to one of the resolutions dealing with community crime prevention and urban crime was an inventory of crime prevention measures. It amounted to a comprehensive categorisation of crime prevention possibilities and gave examples of how crime prevention could become part and parcel of the way in which government and non-government agencies did their job. There were crime prevention measures that could be taken by the traditional criminal justice agencies and crime prevention measures that could be taken through existing government agencies dealing with schools, employment, health and urban planning. Crime prevention ideas which focussed on preventing opportunities for crime (situational crime prevention) were also included, as were community crime prevention ideas.

Among the matters dealt with under community crime prevention were programs for community development and multi-agency cooperation. This multi-agency cooperation would ensure that causes for crime are reduced; programs to ensure that opportunities for alternative activities are developed; that communities themselves are able to set priorities for what government agencies do; and that local communities clearly define their crime problems and their prevention priorities.

The final category, one which underlines all of the above measures, was the need for planning. This is obviously—indeed critically—important. It involves analysis of the crime problem, obtaining accurate information about where crime is occurring, and what crime is occurring (‘mapping the crime problem’) as well as being able to devise appropriate measures and ways of implementing them.

Differences in emphasis inevitably will occur. Britain, for example, has concentrated on personal security programs and inter-agency cooperation. The Netherlands has taken a more centralist approach: relying on a policy unit within the National Department of Justice to help both identify problems that need to be addressed and develop solutions. France has concentrated on local government with local participation. Canada has sponsored community councils. New Zealand has adopted a pilot project model and chosen four different locations throughout the country to test alternative and different ways of tackling the problem of increasing crime.

The approach in South Australia is an amalgam of a number of these. Confronting Crime, the South Australian Crime Prevention Strategy (Sutton & Fisher 1989) provides the starting point, or solid foundation, for the South Australian strategy, and a solid foundation is essential if progress in the complex field of crime prevention is to be made. In some respects, getting ideas right is the easy part. An even greater challenge is to develop and implement organisational structures which can provide particular expression of these philosophies. South Australia is going about this in at least three ways.
The first involves working through a network of regionally-based committees-similar to those in France—which will develop and implement comprehensive local crime prevention plans. So far, thirteen local committees have been established in regions ranging from Port Augusta, in South Australia’s north, to Noarlunga, just south of Adelaide. Plans drawn up by these local committees will be based on analysis, undertaken by local resident and agency representatives, of local crime problems and issues. These plans will be implemented with funding assistance from the South Australian government’s $10 million, five-year crime prevention allocation.

The second arm of the strategy has involved establishing a forty member Coalition Against Crime, chaired by the Premier. The Coalition is the government’s principal advisory group on crime prevention, and comprises representatives of peak resident and voluntary groups, key government agencies, the churches, and trade unions.

The key to the Coalition Against Crime’s effectiveness is its series of expert working parties addressing topics such as violence-reduction, alcohol, drugs and crime, and crime prevention through improved urban and housing design. Each working party develops its own program of seminars, discussion papers and workshops to generate ideas about, and widespread involvement in, crime prevention. In addition, each identifies and recommends exemplary projects with statewide significance which can be fed into local initiatives. For example, the alcohol, drugs and crime group already has advocated support for a server responsibility program, developed in conjunction with the hotel industry and aimed at reducing alcohol-related violence in licensed venues, while the urban and housing design group actively is exploring ways for each major new urban development in South Australia to incorporate crime prevention planning and building standards.

None of these recommendations by expert groups can be expected to take effect without strong support at the state government level. This leads to the third major arm of the strategy: commitment by government ministers and departments. One of the first initiatives under the crime prevention strategy was to request that each government agency prepare a management plan which identified ways they could contribute to the ‘Together Against Crime’ program. These plans now have been prepared and a group of key ministers convened to ensure coordinated implementation. In developing these programs and plans, South Australia has been careful to adapt overseas concepts to local structures and conditions. Nonetheless, our general philosophies are similar, and almost all nations are now moving in the same direction.

The issue of crime prevention and the role of the community is very firmly and squarely on the criminal justice agenda and any country ignores it at its peril. It is essential that we possess not just a general commitment to crime prevention but clear ideas about, and objectives for, our activities. Citizens of any South Australian city would be justified in feeling that very little had been achieved by programs which simply displaced graffiti, vandalism or car theft from one suburb to another. Similarly, as a nation, Australia will have gained little if effective crime prevention in one state merely results in problems being shifted to other parts of Australia.

Australia needs a practical approach which comes to grips with local problems at the local level but at the same time recognises the common
interests of citizens and the nation. Australia's prevention programs must not merely be defensive and focussed on individual security but, like the programs in France, must also have a community basis and attack underlying social problems such as rejection and alienation. Crime prevention in this country must involve not just state and local authorities, but national government agencies. Finally, Australia must develop better measures regarding levels of crime and whether particular initiatives are successful.

New South Wales and South Australia have made a start by initiating annual statewide victimisation surveys, which will enable accurate and objective assessment of levels of crime in these jurisdictions to be made. It is imperative that every other jurisdiction in Australia follows suit. Accurate measures of crime and fear of crime are necessary to assess the success of new approaches.

Whatever one's political persuasions and whatever part of Australia one comes from-indeed one almost can say whatever the part of the western industrialised world-significant crime problems must be acknowledged and innovative solutions are a matter of urgency. Those who would ignore this reality and hope that exclusive reliance on traditional, reactive 'law and order' approaches somehow will 'rescue' us from the situation need look no further than the USA, which has tended to become the model for Australia in so many respects.

In 1990-91, the USA passed the landmark of having a standing population of 1,000,000 adults in prison at any one time. This amounts to an imprisonment rate per head of population six times higher than South Australia's. Penalties and sentences are becoming increasingly severe and (following the USA Supreme Court approval) at least thirty states have reintroduced the death penalty and are applying it with increasing frequency. Law enforcement technology has become more and more sophisticated and expensive. In the USA, sub-machine guns, high-tech computers, tanks and even submarines (in one or two instances) have been thrown into the war against crime. Despite this, crime rates in USA cities have continued to soar to a point where its capital, Washington-a city smaller than Adelaide-each year has about forty-five times our rate of murders.

Indeed, the USA is at a stage where law enforcement and other experts openly express concerns that problems are becoming so extreme, and policing so sophisticated and expensive, that some cities may have to acknowledge they no longer can provide security for the entire population. Already, private security in the USA is burgeoning, with few standards set or regulations applied. The situation which USA experts fear is that, before long, only the wealthy will be able to obtain adequate protection from crime. Given this situation, it is not surprising that many authorities in the USA are intensively reassessing old assumptions.

The USA was strongly represented at a 1990 international conference on crime prevention in Montreal, and in 1991 a major delegation of its mayors is in Paris, discussing and wanting to know more about the Bonnemaison approach. It is likely that all parties to those discussions have agreed there will be no easy, 'instant' solutions. There are inadequacies in the simplistic argument that crime rates can be reversed merely by intensifying police and criminal justice reactions. Also, sweeping views that increases in welfare and social justice will provide the panacea must be rejected.
There is more than enough evidence that countries such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands—which have developed some of the most effective social welfare nets—have not been exempt from dramatic increases in crime since World War II. It is no longer acceptable to dismiss crime prevention merely as an unwarranted diversion from the more important task of social reform.

As programs such as Neighbourhood Watch attest, police and many sections of the community long ago made up their minds on the issue of crime prevention. The task now is for all levels of government and all types of organisations—including the private sector—to lend support to new approaches.

Traditional enforcement and up-front, broad-based community prevention are essential methods of fighting crime. If the traditional adversarial role in the community remains, this will probably fail. Crime has been no respecter of political ideology. Social democratic governments and conservative governments throughout the world have had to confront the same problem. In the final analysis, crime is a community concern for which community solutions must be found. This conference will be another step in building a national consensus on the need to confront crime on a bipartisan political basis through both enforcement and prevention. Much of the challenge may still be ahead, but a promising start has been made.

References
