

Tough love

Mark Oaten, the Liberal Democrat spokesman on Home Affairs, talks to Carol Jenkins about the party's promises on improving policing, cutting bureaucracy and getting tough on offenders who 'lie around in cells reading magazines'.

The past two years have been a time of both loss and gain for Mark Oaten, the Liberal Democrat MP for Winchester.

During this time, he has gained the high-profile role as the party's spokesman for Home Affairs issues - an impressive advancement - considering he has served for just six years as an MP. But he also admits to losing quite a bit of his hair with the stress of having to respond to the raft of legislation and announcements made by the former Home Secretary David Blunkett.

The last few months have seen all of the political parties becoming pre-occupied with losses and gains of a different kind, as they limber up for the General Election - which many have speculated will be held next month. Mr Oaten has been making some announcements of his own setting out the party's stall on crime and policing issues. He addressed delegates at the party's spring conference in Harrogate last month in which he said the Liberal Democrat approach to crime and policing was to try and gain ground from the fact that while the Government had been 'good on its rhetoric around tough on crime, that it been pretty weak on on the causes of crime.'

Tough liberalism

Speaking to *Police*, Mr Oaten says much more needs to be done to tackle the causes of crime and to prevent re-offending and that his party's concept of 'tough liberalism', which he champions, sums up this approach.

'I've got a strong view that we need a radical change of thought on crime and of how to reduce re-offending. Often some of the existing policies put forward by the other parties on crime have sounded quite tough but I don't think they've actually been that tough - they've been quite soft and not very effective options. That's why I'm arguing for looking at it in a different way and demonstrating it can be a robust system.'

One of the examples he gives of this 'different way' and of 'tough liberalism' is what he sees of the inability of anti-social behaviour orders [ASBOs] to make a real long-term difference to offending behaviour.

'We think they are a useful tool for the police in terms of preventing an individual causing disorder in a particular area but an ASBO alone isn't a guarantee of stopping the behaviour. There's a danger that it's a sticking plaster approach in that it moves the problem from one area to another. Actually issuing an order or a fine, gives no guarantee that little



Getting tough: Mark Oaten

Johnny isn't going to come out and do the same thing next week,' says Mr Oaten.

ASBO plus

His idea would be to introduce a new form of ASBO - an "ASBO Plus" which he describes as an ASBO with extra conditions attached which will hopefully help change offending behaviour in the long-term. The conditions could include attending a drug rehabilitation centre or undergoing some form of training or community work where appropriate.

'I want to see the punishment matched with a set of activities to stop them doing it again,' he explains.

Although he recognises that the idea would be both difficult and expensive to set up, he believes that the Government should not shy away from the idea because of its potential to reduce crime substantially.

Another example he gives of 'tough liberalism' - is to introduce a system of education and training in prisons, which he says, will help reduce long-term offending behaviour. At the moment 71 per cent of 18, 19 and 20 year-olds are coming out of prison and committing further crime. Figures also show that 80 per cent of prisoners have the writing skills of an eleven-year-old; 65 per cent have the numeracy skills of an eleven-year-old and 50 per cent have the reading skills of an eleven-year-old.

Mr Oaten argues that 'the tough liberal thing to do instead of allowing them to be able to lie around in a prison cell for 23 hours a day reading magazines and then coming out of jail and re-offending, is to put in place a tough working day in prison, which will hopefully give them the skills and training to get a job when they come out of prison.

'What a waste of tax payers' money spending £300 a night to keep them there only to see them re-offend when they get back out?'

As an election looms, the police service is used to the three main parties making promises over how many hundreds of thousands of extra police officers they will chuck at it with the assurance that more police equals less crime – something that has been called into question over the years and dismissed as simplifying the debate. Mr Oaten's party is no different in its promise of extra police – an extra 10,000 over the next five years to be exact.

Tomorrow's technology

The party also supports the Government's pledge of an extra 20,000 community support officers (CSOs). However, he does acknowledge that the emphasis cannot be on numbers alone but on how effectively and productively officers are allowed to use their time. He gives two ways in which a Liberal Democrat government would achieve this – by increasing the amount of technology available to officers and also reducing the bureaucratic burden of paperwork.

'I want to "tech the police up" by giving them a better standard of equipment.

'I guess the frustration I have is if you call out the AA or RAC, they arrive in their van and they've got satellite navigation technology, mobiles, palm tops, all of this kit. Yet your average policeman on the beat is still going around with a notebook.

'I'm not talking about giving them expensive, high-tech, difficult to use equipment, just equipment many of them are used to using in their personal lives to allow them to do their job more efficiently.'

This could include using palm tops rather than notebooks to take statements, which could be transferred, live back to the station and more use of mobile fingerprint technology, he explains.

Mr Oaten describes it as 'non-sense' that police officers are often required to fill out up to 17 different types of paperwork in order to prove their judgement is sound.

'I want to trust the judgement of our front-line police officers much more than we do at present rather than getting them to tick



The Liberal Democrats pledge to cut red tape for officers

Credit: Getty Images

loads of boxes to demonstrate their judgement. I reject the idea that the only way to get good policing is by getting them to fill in loads of forms.'

Mr Oaten's view on the setting up of SOCA [The Serious and Organised Crime Agency] is that while he thinks it is a 'sensible measure' in the fight against serious and organised crime – he is concerned about its accountability and where it will sit in the current tripartite arrangement. He says he believes SOCA should be staffed by constables who are answerable to the Crown.

Federation members will be pleased to hear that his views on the civilisation of custody officers, set out in the SOCA Bill are in line with the organisation's views.

He says he believes it is vital that the custody officer role should be staffed by a fully-qualified and experienced police officer.

'The custody officer has a pivotal position and needs to have the respect and authority over colleagues which I think a civilian would be hard-pressed to get unless that civilian was a long-serving prison officer or a retired police officer.

He also agrees that while he supports the 20,000 increase in CSOs and that CSOs do have the potential to be a useful back-up and support for police officers 'we wouldn't want them replacing fully qualified officers.'

'There is no substitute for the highly-trained, fully-qualified police officer.'

Best in the world

Looking back over the past two years, Mr Oaten has met many police officers and accompanied them on various duties, including raids, but to often disastrous results.

'Whenever I go out and about on raids, I'm considered the kiss of death by the officers because they never seem to get anyone when I'm in the van. They say to me, "We can't understand it – last night we picked up eight people and now you're in the van there's nothing for hours on end."

Despite admitting to being 'duffed over' by the *Spectator*, when he said he thought the British police are the "best in the world", Mr Oaten continues to believe this is the case – even if his presence on undercover operations does result in zero arrests.

'In the past six months I've visited nine forces and cannot praise the police highly enough, although I'm not sure the officers who I've accompanied out on the raids would necessarily say the same about me!'

