

OPINION

WITH TOM PERCY

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Upstream without a paddle

A RETIRING JUDGE recently remarked that being a sentencing judge was a bit like

standing on the banks of a river watching an endless stream of dead bodies flow past.

The courts have to deal with the bodies as best they can, but there isn't much they can do at their end to stop the flow.

The problem lies much further up the river, where no one ever seems to go.

The concept of stopping or even reducing crime in the community by dealing harshly with the end product is generally discredited – and has been for a very long time.

But if you look at most of our current WA politicians or their policies, you wouldn't think so.

Their theory is that increased penalties will solve everything from assaults on police to hoon driving.

Send a "message", they say, and the public will toe the line in fear

of the tougher sanctions. But is there any area of human behaviour where higher penalties have ever successfully eradicated or even reduced offending?

The answer is clearly no.

Crime must be adequately punished but to believe that there is a linear relationship between tougher penalties and reducing crime is to ignore the lessons of both history and recent experience.

Anecdotally, it is said that in Dickensian England, where convicted pickpockets were often hanged in public, there were other pickpockets brazenly operating in the crowd gathered to watch the execution.

In more modern times, the doubling of speeding and drink-driving fines and suspensions has done nothing to stop the carnage on the roads.

The first hoon vehicle publicly crushed in WA (by the Police Minister himself) had no effect on anyone, least of all its former owner

who committed a similar offence in a different vehicle the next day.

The whole idea of "sending a message" is a waste of time, and solves nothing. It is a popular fallacy that supports the equally fallacious concept of punishment as an effective deterrent to crime.

The answer lies in attacking the root causes of the problem, not just punishing the effects. Tackling the problems of poverty, poor parenting and the lack of education among the disadvantaged and lower socio-economic groups would be a significant start.

As would accepting that sending someone to prison is more (rather than less) likely to make them commit further offences.

It's about time someone went back up the river. **STM**

▶ **Tom Percy can be heard on 6PR 882 at 7.30am on Thursdays.**

YOUR SAY WA

Do you agree with Tom?

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GOING UP

▶ **The Strokes:** They're back, they're sober and they're still the best-looking band around that can actually play a tune. Rock and roll.

▶ **Houseboats:** Living life on the water. What better way to leave the hassles of life and bond for the weekend?

▶ **Brian Cox:** Physics has never been so seductive than in his show, *Life on Mars*. This man is single-handedly giving the nerd species sex appeal.

▶ **Nature Direct:** Detoxify your home with chemical-free Australian products for the home.

✔ **Credit ratings:** Don't have a credit card, then you don't have a credit rating. Does anyone out there get this? It's stupid.

✔ **Somewhere:** Why is it that everyone who sees this film by Sofia Coppola ends up walking out? Somewhere right out there.

✔ **Dressing down:** Men are wearing suits now more than ever as a rebellion against redundancy. Smart casual, fellas, is not so smart.

✔ **Steven Tyler:** The one-time Aerosmith frontman is now a big-mouth judge on *American Idol*. Shame on you.

GOING DOWN

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