

Tom Stacey: "Founder" of Electronic Monitoring in the U.K.

Interviewed by Mike Nellis*

Editor's Note: Although not well known to the general public in the United States, Tom Stacey is famous in Great Britain as a novelist, journalist, and publisher whose interests range from anthropology to environmental science to Islamism and the Middle East. But his importance for readers of *Journal of Offender Monitoring* comes from quite another source: In 1981, Stacey wrote a letter to the *The Times* of London in which he put forward, for the first time, the idea that for some offenders, incarceration might be replaced by electronic monitoring. Stacey was so committed to the idea that in 1982 he founded the *Offender's Tag Association* (ota@stacey-international.co.uk) and although his ideas were considered eccentric at the time, today England and Wales have the most widespread and sophisticated electronic monitoring systems in Europe. On the 20th Anniversary of Stacey's letter to *The Times*, Mike Nellis published a short interview with Stacey in the British publication, *Prison Service Journal*. Professor Nellis, a regular contributor to the *Journal*, has now edited the complete interview, which we are pleased to publish in *The Journal* both for its historic interest and for the insights Stacey accumulated in more than twenty years observing the British penal system.

Tom Stacey was born 1930, educated at Eton, and entered Oxford in 1950. He dropped out after two terms "to hurry on with life" and began his journalism career, first with the *Picture Post* and soon as chief foreign correspondent of the *Sunday Times*. He won a Granada "Reporter of the Year" award, and, while working, was briefly imprisoned in India. His first book, based on a travel diary written during two weeks leave while on National Service in Malaya, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1953. He has written six acclaimed novels

and a short story collection, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He currently runs a publishing company, Stacey International, specializing in books on the Middle East. His novel *Decline* concludes with a well observed and insightful section on imprisonment, drawn in part from his 26 years as a prison visitor at HMP Wandsworth:

Prison changes a man. There is the dismantling [and] there is its corollary, the bringing of him so close to himself—if it is prison for the first time, close as never before. If a man is to endure a prison sentence, unless it be a very short one, he will have learned that he must live his life inside the penitentiary as if there is no other life to be lived but that of a prisoner. The truth of this fact was understood almost as well by Jamie as by Joe: perhaps it was even better understood by Jamie, since a man undergoing his first sentence, capable of marking what is happening to him, will observe the rivets and bolts of such a requirement being driven into place one by one (Stacey 1991:263).

Stacey's deep animus towards imprisonment for all but the most violent, disturbed, and professional criminals stimulated him to think of a new sort of alternative to it—the electronic tag—and led to the formation of The Offender's Tag Association in 1982. The temperament which shaped this decision was perhaps formed even earlier than he himself might recognize. Writing of his National [military] Service, aged just 20, he noted:

The stamping army, I am sure, is a necessary evil; but according to my observation it carries with it more evil than it requires, which ranges from waste of time, of course, to ignorant and unfunny brutality (Stacey 1953: 25).

His response to imprisonment, much later in his life, has been four square with that. In view of the major expansion of electronic monitoring that has taken place

in the U.K., his controversial role as a penal reformer, though well outside the established penal reform networks, needs to be acknowledged. This interview took place at Tom Stacey's home, and base of both his publishing company and the Offender's Tag Association, 128 Kensington Church Street, London W8.

Mike Nellis: *There is now national support both for electronically monitored curfews as a sentence and as a means of facilitating early release from prison—home detention curfew (HDC). Could I ask what you think about the current developments in electronic monitoring in this country?*

It is encouraging, particularly with the present government, but it has got a long way to go. I think that the present government is probably doing most of what it can do, given the structures it's working through at the moment, and the state of the technology. But on the structural side a great deal more could be done with HDC. The selection process is cumbersome, and people are being excessively cautious on the political side, partly because of the Opposition which is, in my view, infantile (and will change), and partly because of the lack of planning and of prison organization. Prisoners are sometimes shunted from one prison to another just before they might come up for HDC, but because of delays in the period of assessment, the three month period is too short, and they are out before they can be assessed. So there could be adjustments of that sort. One could easily double the number of people coming out on HDC, and that would be admirable in all sorts of ways.

MN: *This is a far cry from 20 years ago. Could you just tell me something about how you got interested in criminal justice and how the idea for electronic tagging developed?*

It really goes back to my time as a foreign correspondent on the *Sunday*

See TOM STACEY, next page

* Mike Nellis is Professor of Criminal and Community Justice at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

TOM STACEY, from page 16

Times. I was twice arrested and imprisoned, in 1963 and 1965, as happens to foreign correspondents in the course of their duties. It's certainly an error if they get themselves into a position where they get imprisoned, but if you were on the wrong side of the barricades in Yugoslavia last year, you could have been picked up by one of Milosevic's groups and popped inside. I got on the wrong side in India, in the Kashmir dispute, and dumped into a jail, (funnily enough, in Madras in Southern India, in Coimbatore Central Jail, in 1965, but it was still on the Kashmir issue) and was lost to sight for a week

The notion of electronic tagging came to me spontaneously, possibly to other people too—it [simultaneous invention] has happened. I was reflecting on my little group of prisoners, the people who in my own mind I would often consider to be my *miserables*, in a prayerful mood, (I think in the Middle East, where we do a lot of our publishing activity) in early 1981. It seemed to me that an electronic monitoring device could provide an effective means of keeping a certain type of offender under surveillance, and give good public assurance and be politically saleable. So when I came back from that particular short visit abroad I got hold of a friend, Aubrey Baring, who was a

great friend of mine who edited the paper, which was duly printed, presenting the idea. With that letter we formed the original association, The Offender's Tag Association, and became an identifiable lobby group with a little secretariat which was attached to my publishing company's secretariat, a filing system, an endeavor with some coherence, and we drew in one or two key people. One was Carl den Brinker who was an extremely able electronic scientist who sadly died three years ago, and whose work involved him in a company working on defense contracts in the locational field and was enormously fortifying. On the other side, the strictly theological side, was Peter Timms, who was then just ceasing to be Governor of Maidstone prison. Thus, we had a little nucleus.

Those two, Aubrey Baring, and I gave a press conference in early 1983 at the St. Ermin's Hotel, Westminster, which got quite wide coverage—and a great deal of ridicule. It presented the whole idea of the potential for electronic monitoring to the nation, which I think had not been done by anybody else in the world. America hadn't started then and there was certainly no continuous endeavor anywhere else that we'd ever heard of. We were assaulted immediately, in fact even before we started—a matter of hours before we started by the present Prison Ombudsman, Stephen Shaw, and I hope he blushes to remember this. We put out a notice of our press conference with the very barest indication of the subject we were going to raise, which was effectively for a device which could be used either for tracking or tagging, and the theory of it and with some considerable working out. We were vilified by Stephen on the Today program at 8 a.m. on the morning of the conference which we were to hold at 11:00 a.m., on the basis, on his side, of complete ignorance of what we would have proposed. It was described as absurd and unworkable, an electronic ball and chain and other strange offensive remarks from a man who was then influential as head of the Prison Reform Trust. That did us a lot of damage from the start, and set a tone, which may have been set in any

Stacey's deep animus towards imprisonment for all but the most violent, disturbed, and professional criminals stimulated him to think of a new sort of alternative to it.

or two. There was no expectation of my being discovered, it was just by chance I was. I experienced prison for real and that is a thing that the imagination is not good at really entering; you can visit prisons day in, day out, but the actual sense of what it is to be in a very small space with no handle on the inside of the door, being absolutely at the mercy of the man who has the key to your cell, is something you've got to live, really, to know it. You can't complain without the person who has the key to your door knowing what it is you're going to complain about, nine times out of ten it will be him or his colleagues. That experience back in 1965 taught me the essential things that one needs to know if one is ever in a jail. So when my life became that much more predictable, and I moved on from being a roving foreign correspondent at the end of the 1960s, and established myself primarily as a writer, and also as the head of a publishing company, and I was thinking of what I could do to fulfill my civic duties by a bit of voluntary work, and becoming a prison visitor was a natural thing. I have actually been a prison visitor now at Wandsworth Prison since the early 1970s and it has become a major part of my life.

skilled man in the electronics field, and we began to think about it together. We took the idea to the Electronics Department of the University of Kent, with which Aubrey had an association, for, what you might call a pre-feasibility study. We thought initially both of a curfew tag and a tracking tag. We thought the major potential was in tracking tagging, and I still think that.

That was at the end of 1981. Willie Whitelaw was then Home Secretary. I took the plan to the Home Office and I saw Dennis Trevelyan, who was then Head of Prisons and he dutifully listened to me with a young aide right beside him for about an hour and a half with apparent incredulity. I learnt a great deal from that interview too, namely the obsessive caution of civil servants at making any form of response to any new idea for fear of embarrassing their political masters.

It became quite clear to me as a result of that interview—and the fact that we got a zero response when we asked for Kent University to be given a grant of £5,000 towards a full feasibility study—that I would get nowhere on my own. So I then wrote a long letter to *The Times*, at the suggestion of Charlie Douglas-Home, a

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 17

case, among a whole swath of people who we were totally not expecting as opponents to what seemed to us to be a purely humanitarian consideration.

MN: Why did you go straight to the Home Office rather than approaching the Howard League¹ or the Prison Reform Trust² or NACRO³, given that they are the kind of milieu in which new ideas about penal reform are developed?

entirely spontaneous and independent development in Boulder, Colorado where later that year, in 1983, the first primitive curfew tag was applied to an offender there. A local magistrate had suggested it. Things began to move in the United States—by about 1986 it had begun to take some shape—and there was an early rather useful paper in Texas that came out at that time. I had by this time become quite a frequent visitor to PAPPAG, Parliamentary All-Party Penal Affairs Group

much wanted to keep alive our idea of the tracking tag and not allow, certainly in Britain, the notion to settle purely upon the curfew tag, which I think does have only relatively limited potential for true humanitarian reform in the penal field.

MN: Could you explain why you think the curfew tag has got limitations and why the tracking tag could have greater potential for penal reform?

The tracking tag is wholly valuable because you can monitor an offender right around the clock and that offender can go out to work and live a very largely normal life but in a way that gives the public a great degree of protection. It is politically saleable and of course it acts as the perpetual tap on the shoulder to the offender, potentially reshaping attitudes and changing habits, inner and outer.

MN: What gives you such confidence that it will change offenders' attitudes? I can understand and have always understood the logic of how it could be used to keep people out of custody but what makes you feel that it will change offender's attitudes?

We've got to assume in our field of concern that attitudes are changeable. It is a position of total despair if one can't; the whole premise is that attitudes are changeable. My own conviction is that everybody is redeemable, it has a religious coloring to it but it comes spontaneously from my own experience of people. Changes come from within but are influenced from without, and a measure of fear is always going to play a rightful part. Fear is a completely necessary function in the structure of human nature and one does know of reformed alcoholics or reformed addicts. There is, I think, a completely supportable presumption that with the tag you are effectively putting the key of the drink cupboard into the pocket of the alcoholic and making him decide not to use it. Once he has fought the intense desire to open that drink cupboard and have a shot of alcohol and beaten it, he is on his way to potential recovery. One does know in the prison visiting field, as I bet you know in your own field, that a huge measure of crime is a consequence of weak discipline, which

See TOM STACEY, next page

"We thought initially both of a curfew tag and a tracking tag, but the major potential was in tracking—and I still think that."

It doesn't really fit any of their briefs. I was already a member of the Howard League. I have respect for them in their academic work but have quite considerable reservations in their potential usefulness and often think that John Howard would be embarrassed at the emphasis of their endeavors and the way their money is spent. I had learnt already in a long period of being a prison visitor to have extremely little respect for NACRO; I am simply taking the prisoner's view of NACRO, and I am bound to say after 26 years of being a prison visitor I have yet to hear any worthy commendation about NACRO from anybody that I have been seeing at Wandsworth Prison. I think they could do a lot better. So it was first and foremost a political decision to go to the Home Office, to go for the politics of it, because this is where one could sell it. I was relatively close to the Conservative Party and able to move with relative ease among the higher levels of the Tory party, and therefore it was a natural route for me.

MN: Did you maintain your contact with the Home Office after the rebuff by White-law's government? Did you contact Leon Brittan (the next Home Secretary) and talk further about it?

Yes, once we'd started we continued to keep the notion alive. We repeated the proposal, and requested research money, to all successive Home Secretaries. We were greatly helped in this respect by the

and Harold Wilson's former Minister of the Arts was a supporter of ours, (if not paid up, he was sympathetic) and was then chairman of it and we had many sessions with them and so that got us and particularly myself talking to Parliament and to the Home Affairs Committee. When Douglas Hurd became Home Secretary this was again helpful, he being a friend of mine from boyhood. (We were both at the same school), and as a result it was easier to draw his attention to this potential, he wouldn't have otherwise been aware of it. He sent out his Junior Minister, Lord Caithness, to have a look at what was going on in Florida in the late 1980s and elsewhere, and that produced the initial serious pilot endeavor of 1989.

MN: Before we go on to that can you tell me if you have direct contact with people in the United States who were involved in tagging, did you yourself go and see what they were doing, or were you relying on reading the papers that were coming out of the United States?

Yes, I did have early contact because my life took me to the United States anyway, so I saw what was going on in Florida and we were just then beginning of course to get some useful statistical and academic coverage from the United States, so there was a bit of both and we were in correspondence also with the leading criminologists there, and that helped us fill out the picture. We very

TOM STACEY, from page 18

results in hurt to society and hurts the person who is hurting society. The great majority of people in prison do not choose to become professional criminals; those that did *ought* to be in prison. But the great majority didn't and don't want to be professional criminals and therefore ought not to be in prison. If by any chance they can be persuaded to recapture the discipline which they lost or failed to get earlier in life—and very often for extremely powerful reasons they were bereft of this that is all to the good.

MN: What were your views about the viability of tagging as a measure in its own right for changing offenders' attitudes? Or did you take the view that it would need tagging and social work, tagging and support from the Probation Service, tagging and alcohol rehabilitation programs or drug rehabilitation programs to make a difference? Did you actually think that tagging could work on its own, or would it work better if it was used in conjunction with other means of changing offenders' attitudes?

The way the tag functions is the main element. Inevitably it will involve other people, someone to come and fit it and you're going to be beholden to whoever is looking after the monitoring device, so there is going to be some sort of one-to-one relationship in any case. I had presumed Probation would cooperate and blessedly now we are seeing that happening, which is a wonderful thing because there are some marvelous people in that business. Regarding your question, the value of the tag is, of course, the fact that it is a piece of machinery whose record of compliance of the offender absolutely absolves a Probation Officer, for example, from any kind of snooping or spying. But clearly, a human relationship attached to the kind of ruthlessness of the mechanics is a valuable one, but the ruthlessness of the mechanics has a real role to play.

MN: Why do you think the penal reform organizations, Prison Reform Trust, Stephen Shaw and Probation, were so hostile to your proposals when you first told the world about electronic monitoring?

Two factors are involved. One is the heritage of authoritarian ideologies of the 20th Century, exemplified by fascism and I suppose by communism, but also kept alive by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*: Not unreasonably, people of that era, which has now been gone nearly a generation, were alarmed at the notion of that kind of Big Brother surveillance which was so brilliantly demonstrated by Orwell. So that created a kind of emotional wariness, not to say alarm, among people who perhaps had a certain internal pride at

Tagging was going to get taken seriously anyway but we probably brought it on ahead by a decade or two because of what happened in the United States. We were quite effective in our own right actually. I wrote a number of articles in major newspapers, to demonstrate what was happening. I visited the British Columbian tagging structure which has been going since 1987 and that was clearly easier to defend than an American one—because the penal structure was much more like ours—and because it is easy for

Aubrey Baring and I gave a press conference in early 1983 which got quite wide coverage—and a great deal of ridicule.

being more of a libertarian in the civil sense than their neighbor. That was one factor. It combined with another factor on the professional side, which I think is this. The Probation Officer in doing his or her job feels a certain sanctity about the relationship with his or her client and they see this as an intrusion into that sanctity. I think they now see that they were quite wrong, it is quite the opposite actually: it has the effect of absolving them from taking responsibility for what is an absolutely central function for the Probation Officer, which is to keep a close eye on their clients in many situations. At the time, it was easy for some people, who perhaps too often liked the sound of their own voices, to arouse these fears and to take a political—and easily saleable—stance. The progress of tagging was done consistent damage by Harry Fletcher of NAPO⁴, a Luddite, tragically, but his time is fortunately past. I myself have been engaged in twenty or thirty public interchanges with him on television or on radio or elsewhere, in which I got sadder and sadder at his failure to understand the potential of a major advance in the field in which he was supposed to be working.

MN: Would you say that Lord Caithness's visit to America and your prior relationship with Douglas Hurd were the turning points for tagging, the things that enabled it to be taken seriously?

people to be derogatory about what they would call an "American gimmick". We were getting leading articles in our favor and we certainly did mould public opinion quite separately from any political move. Douglas's own Home Office endeavor in 1989 was so badly thought out, mismanaged, (not by him) but, I'm afraid, because of a lack of thought, a general lack of quality of those running it at the time, it would have almost been better that it shouldn't have happened then. It was crassly mismanaged. The tag was given to tearaway teenagers on remand. There was great incentive for the press to almost bribe people to frustrate it. While this made one more determined, really, the difficult period for us was that period immediately following 1989. We kept going. We had a mailing list of about 600 people. We kept people informed of all that was happening in the rest of the world, and tagging *was* already happening in the rest of the world.

I am afraid they are going the same way in Scotland right now. It is quite extraordinary. They just are not looking at the experience of others or stopping to think—not looking at the kind of people they ought to be tagging in the pilot schemes. It has had a bad press in Scotland but the whole movement now is so strong throughout Europe and the

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 19

rest of the world that Scotland will indeed adopt it.

MN: *Who are the members of the Offender's Tag Association?*

The Association mails to people that we've identified as being interested and some of who have expressed their interest. We don't charge a membership fee, we do keep up a pretty wide correspondence and get a response quite widely from all those we send our overviews to. We've set out about 20 so far. We reach out to politicians,

No, I didn't actually think that, because the evidence was too strong, and will become that much stronger when the tracking tag comes. I've always been forecasting too early on the tracking tag, and I'm still busy forecasting. I may be a little bit too quick in my expectations but the evidence will be so persuasive when it is forthcoming. Of course, in a kind of way, we've always got a platform not only because so many of our prisons are horrible and because there are constant outrages (as with the bullying in Wormwood Scrubs)—to demonstrate the essential primitiveness of imprisonment as the standard punishment for civil misde-

those supposedly engaged in prison reform, as in the Howard League and indeed in NACRO, actually go into prisons themselves. I spend 2 hours per week, and have done for the last twenty-six years of my life (*as a prison visitor*), sitting on the grey blanket in a space of thirteen feet by six feet, usually with a plastic bucket—latterly, very recently, not *always* with a plastic bucket. To pretend that to be tagged and curfewed at home is a more vicious form of punishment than that, it astonishes me that people could say that. Nonetheless, the broad public can now be easily persuaded that the kind of penitentiary structure that we have in too much of the western world now is truly as appalling as we now regard the Bedlams of the 1890. The human race, broadly speaking, is advancing so much; that is part of my conviction—it is not universal, but the more people I see, and I have a long career in watching—the race *is* advancing,

When Douglas Hurd became Home Secretary, he sent a junior minister to have a look at what was going on in Florida in the late 1980s. That led to Britain's first serious pilot project, in 1989.

a lot of people in the legal profession and quite a lot of people in the media. Our letterhead shows those who are committed supporters. We've got a former Home Secretary, an extremely experienced stipendiary magistrate, influential Members of Parliament, two former Chief Inspectors of Prison, academics like Bob Lilly, two former Ministers, a former Prison Governor, churchmen, SDP Member of the House of Lords, people who perhaps straddle fields. Gerry Priestland was an old foreign correspondent colleague of mine, with the BBC in India, a typical kind of thinking man who is very useful to have among us. We built up to this over a period of time and probably from the response we get, clearly we've influenced thought in all those fields, the judiciary among them actually. We were derided by the former Lord Chief Justice ten years ago, but no longer, because we now have Lord Bingham saying, well, we've got to look at this more and use it more.

MN: *Did you actually fear after the first trial in 1989/90 that tagging may perhaps never happen, that the discredit into which it fell would jeopardize the chances of developing it in the future?*

meanor. It is an incredibly clumsy and counterproductive method of dealing with people. You don't have to persuade most people of an open mind that it is a ridiculous form of punishment: you take a man or a woman who has offended and put them in a situation that when they've served their punishment they find it almost impossible to live a normal life, they've lost a career, they've very often lost any family structure they might have had, they've lost their self esteem and they carry the mark of Cain. It is an intrinsically absurd notion. Penitentiary imprisonment is a new thing—what is it, 150 years old?—and its time is past.

We ought to have thought of something better and with the tag we do now have something different in kind. It is different in kind because the tag does absolutely carry that firm disciplining factor. It is not in the same range of alternatives like community service or probation or un-monitored suspended sentencing. It is a genuine constraint, working outwardly in a daily way but inwardly permanently. It is immensely more civilized than prison. It used to astonish me when I was attacked by civil libertarians, the endless debates we've had, and I was much depressed to discover how little

MN: *I can understand the religious roots of your animosity towards prison more than I can understand the political roots of it because yours is very much a minority view within the Conservative party. I understand that there has been a liberal humanitarian wing in the Conservative party and that liberal Conservatives have been a very influential body in penal reform generally, but the view that you're expressing about imprisonment is infinitely more liberal than many people in the Conservative party would accept now.*

You've probably got that wrong, Mike, in that the average sort of good Conservative that you're describing, very much a member of the general public, has two concurrent feelings. One, he's exasperated by criminality; and two, he basically works on a *lex talionis*⁵ basis: they hurt me, we've got to hurt them. To do that, prison is all that is available, that is the point. I don't think that it's had a political coloring, the idea of tagging, it is purely humanitarian. I think that the person who might wish to flog an offender might equally well be perfectly humanitarian, he might well say "flog 'em", because that will be the best way of dissuading this

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 20

person from his own folly in the future. I don't think we can put political colorings on it, I've never felt that tagging has anything to do with party politics.

The only thing that has had to do with party politics as far as I'm concerned is that I know my way around the Tory Party and I don't know my way around the other parties. But I am a substantial supporter of Jack Straw, I may say, and I've exchanged words with him, to congratulate him on what he's doing. The Labour Party has been more alert to the potential of tagging, as it's turned out, but partly because of us: we were mailing the right people, who were advising Straw in the early stages. I think we were bringing a lot of facts to their attention at the right time, but they have actually been a great deal better than several Conservative Home Secretaries down the line, except perhaps for Douglas.

MN: What do you like about the way the New Labour government is developing electronic tagging?

They've got open minds and they're not frightened of the odd pressure group, as the Home Office has traditionally been. They have a wonderful strength, in that they know how to handle those who will perhaps be their most natural supporters. Probably the average Probation Officer leans a little bit more to the left than to the right, and if the Labour party says well, look, come on, this tagging is a good idea, it is a great deal easier for them to be heard by Probation Officers than it is for the Tory party, and they've taken advantage of that particular state of affairs. I wouldn't be surprised if there is not a lot of truth in what Ann Widdecombe says about Jack Straw, that they're using electronic tagging to save prison spaces, but that seems to be absolutely admirable in its own right, and it's ridiculous for Widdecombe to complain about this, and we're saying so. I shall be extremely sorry if they come into government and get hoisted by this. It would be absurd if they don't carry on and extend what the Labour party has started.

MN: As I understand you, you've always wanted to see tagging used to reduce the prison population, to use it as an alternative to prison for people who shouldn't be there. You are firmly convinced that there are many people who could be dealt with in better ways. So how does Michael Howard [Conservative Government Home Secretary] square with your view of things? He put electronic monitoring back on the agenda but his views about imprisonment are very far removed from yours.

The first tagging effort was so badly thought out and mismanaged, it would have almost been better if it hadn't happened.

I have a certain respect for what Michael Howard did. Indeed he brought back electronic monitoring, I think he saw the potential rehabilitative factor; it's not difficult to see that. We're in the business of trying to reduce crime. That is what we want to do—reduce crime. My experience as a prison visitor tells me that the baddies were very frightened of Michael Howard. He did have a pretty chilling effect. Now, there are a number of cases of miscarriages of justice and that sort of thing, and you can sort of get cases of slight miscarriages of justice, where somebody is excessively punished as a result of what Howard represented, but I think the falling crime figures indicated the force of what he did, and if we lower crime we reduce criminals, and tagging is in no way contrary to what he was standing for.

MN: Did you or other people in the OTA have a hand in getting Michael Howard to reconsider electronic tagging in 1995?

I know we did because we were addressing the Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons and we knew we had strong friends like Virginia Bottomley, who was influential at the time. There wasn't a single Home Secretary or junior minister in the structures that we lobbied or presented our thoughts to, but we circulated papers throughout Parliament and kept the idea of tagging alive,

and also kept it alive publicly. I think if you search through cuttings and articles that were written and look at the broadcasts, we were involved in all of those. We were persuasive, doing a steady lobbying function.

MN: Did you go and see Michael Howard as you had seen previous Home Secretaries?

I know Michael Howard a little bit socially, but not when he was in office. Oh yes, I was in Downing Street, not to

see Michael Howard but when John Major's chief policy advisor called me in to discuss tagging at Number 10 during his period of premiership, we brought to him key figures about the success of electronic monitoring juvenile offenders in America, very young offenders. We brought him analyses, by people with the profoundest humanitarian principles, to show how effective this could be with very young people down as young as 12, which Jack Straw himself is now actively considering and intending, I think, to bring in. This would help to change habits, especially with those juveniles where there is something in the nature of a stable home, and especially with those who have not yet experienced custody. For example, Roger Graef [TV documentary director] found in the preparation of one of his recent programs on teenage offenders in Texas, that when they were put on the tag they could give a plausible excuse to their peer-offenders for not joining their gang and making a bloody nuisance of themselves. The tag is useful in that respect. So these things we were able to bring to the attention of the leaders of the Party. A function was performed. I won't claim too much, but I think without us it probably wouldn't have happened.

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 21

MN: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I would have thought from what you are saying that an expansion of the numbers of people going to prison and an expansion of electronic monitoring as well is the worst of both worlds?

The prison population has actually roughly stayed near 65,000. This is a reasonable statistic to bring up and we've got about a couple of thousand on the tag at the moment who would otherwise be in prison, so we'd be up to 67,000, I suppose. Nobody wants more

potential for great fear of being banged up in prison—that is useful. Let it happen. But after, what of the person who does not wish to be a criminal, and is not instinctively driven to crime by some grievous fault in the personality? What will he or she gain from prison? Completely nothing but rotting away, absolutely doing nothing but rotting away. I know there is no rehabilitative method in prison that will work, I've seen it being tried for too long. I'm all for education, obviously, they do their best, but the whole thing is actually hopeless, the whole notion of putting people in incarceration just doesn't help and won't ever help.

120 years or so. Out of this change, in a generation or two will emerge new structures which will be wiser and deeper. On the basis of revised definitions there will be, in my firm conviction, standard values which will be found to have survived the whole turmoil of change. All of this enormous reassessment will lead to much greater stability and to a fall in the amount of criminality.

MN: Out of this reassessment of values, the prison will come to be seen as an anachronism, do you think, and obsolete?

There will always be a function for prisons, you've got to put the professional bank robber behind bars, and I'm afraid you've got to have your Broadmoors and Rampton for those who are disturbed. I think it will also be relevant for those who are slightly disturbed and just, I'm afraid, criminally awkward, not much more than that, Society, and that is a misfortune. I've longed for the legalization of drugs. Current policy is a complete absurdity. Nothing could be more cretinous than the latest announcement we've had at the Tory Party conference, which I can't believe will be carried through.

MN: Which drugs are we talking about here?

People who smoke cannabis are being seen as members of the criminal community. I have pleaded that all drugs should be legalized, not partially, but all drugs, internationally, all at once. It is a sad fact in western Europe, not to say the western world, that this widely recognized benefit, boon, is not on any international agenda, because in democratic politics the first person who raises the flag for across-the-board legalization of all drugs (let us say from the age of 21, strictly enforced) would face a political blowback and nobody dares to do it. Yet an enormous number of highly sensible people do realize that this is completely ridiculous, that 60% of people in prison are there in one way or another because of drugs. Enormous resources are expended on that. There will always be 0.5% of the

See TOM STACEY, next page

“After twenty-six years of visiting prisons, I know that the shock of arrest is admirable, the shock of that banging of the door, the utter coldness and fear of being banged up in prison—that is useful. Let it happen. But after, what will he or she gain from prison? Completely nothing but rotting away.”

people in prison. No government wants more people in prison, for its own sake. What governments do want to do is to reduce crime and if part of that is by frightening the potential offending community, so be it, let them be frightened, I've got nothing against that. The great majority of citizens would share that view and it is a natural massive public concern, the problems of crime. So I don't think that either party is interested in increasing the number of people in prison for its own sake; they want to put the fear of God into offenders and reduce crime. If putting them in fear of God is a part of the way of reducing crime, well, then do it, but I am of course wholly convinced that imprisonment and longer sentences are the wrong way to go about it. I do actually think this back-end, HDC structure, is admirable and entirely sensible.

As I have said, after twenty-six years of visiting prisons, I know that the shock of arrest is admirable, the shock of that banging of the door, the utter coldness and

So let there be arrest, let there be people held in custody to begin with, let them get the shock of their lives—that could even be quite nasty—and then, okay, tag them and monitor the tag sentence—preferably monitor by human beings as well as by an electronic device. Let that device be ruthless, and we shall see an advance.

At the other end of the thing, of course, you would feel, just as I do, that what is creating the tendency to crime, and perhaps the increasing tendency to crime in western society, not least British society, is that we are going through a period of very substantial turmoil. The breakdown and reassessment of values in relation to family, neighborhood, urbanization and mobility are all involved, as is the form of analysis which regards people as economic units rather than as human selves. A degree of coherence—“usness”, if you know what I mean—is necessary, all of which we are in the process of rediscovering. It is an extraordinary period of hazardous change in human society, which has been going on now for

TOM STACEY, from page 22

people who will destroy their lives with drink or drugs. Legalization doesn't mean drug use will increase, it will increase for a moment, there will be a blip of two or three years and a few political reputations might be put at hazard, then it will settle down. Those reputations are the only reason why, tragically in the western world, this is not taking place. All our societies are going absolutely in the wrong direction.

MN: As you have said, HDC by anybody's standards would seem to be a success, and has certainly neutralized what remaining opposition there was to tagging in the probation service. After all, it has reduced the use of custody. So what do you think of the rather hostile attitude of the present Conservative opposition to these developments in electronic tagging, what do you make of the Party's resistance to it at the moment?

It is my fault for not having got William Hague [leader of Conservative opposition] personally to one side and spent ten minutes with him, so I shall try a little bit harder. It is essentially knee jerk politics in the way that it is run in western democracies, what one party in power does the other party, the contending party, has to object to it. It is as daft as that, in my view. We are pressing on this and will continue to press, and I myself don't believe that it will last if the Conservatives come to power.

MN: One of the things that seems to have resulted from Conservative Party criticism of tagging at the moment is an attempt to portray it as a soft option, and the Police always seem to have had their doubts about it. One of the paradoxes of the tagging debate is that you seem to have one set of people who worry about the sinister Orwellian aspects of it and another group of people who try to portray it as a Mickey Mouse approach.

You can pull a vote or two sometimes by saying this is a soft option. The fact is, the tag can be just as un-soft as you wish it to be. It could be immensely intrusive and

give you a very hard time in organizing your life and it may be that you'll get excessively breached if you do that, in which case, alas, prison is the only alternative. It is by no means a soft option. If you blank out somebody's ability to leave home between 7p.m. and 7a.m. for six months, that is a very significant restraint. With a tracking tag you can tightly bind somebody, all his movements; he can have his life absolutely tightly controlled right round the clock. The trouble is that soft options have got a bad name because of the constant cry of the professionally liberal voice saying you can do it all by kindness. You can't do it all by kindness. We all have

MN: You have made it clear that you have always thought of tracking tagging⁶ as the way ahead. Could you tell me a little bit about the technology that is being developed now, and speculate as to what you think the future technical and legal possibilities of electronic tagging might be?

I'm probably not good on the legal possibilities, but, as I said before, tracking tagging could be applicable to a far wider swath of offenders if it existed. It has got to be portable, it ought to be like the anklet or bracelet that we have now, and it should locate the offender at any

One of the paradoxes of the debate is that you seem to have one set of people who worry about the sinister Orwellian aspects of tagging and another group of people who try to portray it as a Mickey Mouse approach.

friends who are magistrates, who are indeed people of the utmost kindness, but by the seventh return to court of X or Y for the same offence, every sort of community penalty has been applied and discredited. In fact, community penalties are fundamentally scorned. The public is misled about this. I see people in Wandsworth Prison who are serving four and a half years and their life has been destroyed because the early constraints that they were given in the court were simply not monitored, so they ignored them, virtually from day one, and came to scorn them. You can't scorn the tag, and that is the great value of it, I have had somebody just as I describe who was on a series of drink driving disqualifications and probation, two suspended sentences. He reoffended and got four and a half years, he defied all the community penalties, nobody watched him, nobody knew what he was doing, it is impossible, they couldn't do it. But the tag would have done it. And now his life is destroyed; he's in for four and a half years or so, two and half of it anyway, he's a mess, his life's a mess, his family's a mess and that is absolutely the result of the true soft option. Well, the tag isn't a soft option.

point right round the clock. He or she can then be given a regime of where he or she has got to be at any given time, lives at point A, works at point B, travels between the two, may do only that except for special permission to visit the doctor or whatever else is permitted by the monitoring authority or the probation officer or whoever is in charge of the operation.

Technically, tracking tagging is moving very fast. This is largely a transatlantic thing. There are effectively two methods—or three in that one is a combination of both technologies. The one that is most rapidly advancing in the United States uses global positioning satellites (GPS), where satellites home in on a particular individual. We have around a thousand people now under tracking tag surveillance in the United States. They are people who otherwise would have been in custody or on remand, with some violent parolees and stalkers on restriction orders among them. GPS positioning satellites require a transceiver which has a fair battery weight and is not at the moment portable on an ankle or wrist, which you

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 24

carry, voluntarily, in a little shoulder bag which is about the size of a very small tape recorder. That is at the same time transmitting from an anklet or bracelet of a normal tagging sort which is again locating you to the base monitor via the cellular telephone structure. So you've got the two devices which give a pretty sound coverage of where you are. Now these are perfectly likely to come together in the next year or two with increased miniaturization.

The other method of locating an individual round the clock is through hyperbolic fixing which is on a horizontal wave-length in the way that a yacht is located on the ocean. It works on the basis of time propagation, measuring the time that it takes for a radio signal to get from A to B. It is very high level technology and needs a certain beacon structure in any given community. It will certainly become available fairly soon. It will have a very substantial function in healthcare and that is very useful, because the costs of the structure of such fixing will be borne by those who would wish to take out health insurance policies, who are vulnerable to crises in health while out and about. People who perhaps have a heart condition or epileptic condition, or might even be suffering from Alzheimer's, where they are lost or collapsed in the street, and with this technology they or somebody else could press a button and the medical authorities would know exactly where they are. There will be a substantial market for that, so we have every reason to suppose that within the next ten years there will be a tracking tag potential and the multiple advantage of that will be immediately seen and it could apply to something like 50% of people who would otherwise be in prison.

MN: Well, you have criticized the penitentiary as something that was misconceived and I am sure you know George Bernard Shaw pointed out that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Do you think there are any risks and dangers with electronic monitoring? Are there ways in which this technology, which you

believe to have so much humanitarian potential, could be misused?

In a free society there aren't—and our society is wonderfully free. I'm an old newspaperman, and I do not foresee Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* coming. The world is going away from this. Given that [progress we are making toward freedom], there are only advantages [to the use of electronic monitoring]. The issue of tagging is sort of analogous to the surveillance cameras in shopping malls. There is a tiny potential for abuse but if it gets excessive it will be curbed. A shopping mall camera could technically pick up somebody engaged in an adulterous embrace and so damage a family if that tape was distributed, but that would be an extremely unlikely development, and if it started to happen there would be mental suffering that would soon be put right in an open society. I've got a lot of faith in man's commitment to his own freedom and to the way that he is working it out. All the broad signs are very good in that respect. If there are certain health risks with tagging—actually Carl den Brinker was extremely assiduous about this and established just what risk there might be—this will be sorted out, and actually at the moment there is no sign of anything; it's certainly a great deal less than the mobile telephone. So, I'm pretty satisfied about all that.

MN: Given the momentum that undoubtedly does exist about electronic monitoring now, is there a continuing role for the OTA or have you served your purpose?

No, we haven't [outlived our purpose]. Our function now is kicking the nonsense out of the Conservative party. [Former government minister] Ann Widdecombe's proposal [to tighten drug laws, announced at the Conservative party conference, October 2000—*Editor*] would involve building more prisons. This is a ridiculous idea, a quite fantastically absurd way to spend public money. Prisons are very wasteful in themselves, they are highly expensive. It costs almost half as much again to

keep a man in prison as it does to keep a child at the most expensive public school in the country. It is an astonishing way to spend money, an absurdity. So we have to keep the flame alive and keep in sight the potential for the tracking tag. This really ought to affect tagging, because the cost factor is so significant here, which governments do care about. We shall continue to put out our newsletter and continue to be a coherent body, offering ourselves for interview and broadcast and whatever else, whenever these issues come to public attention.

MN: I'm very taken with the remarks that you've made about the broader vision that you have about human development and how you see prisons becoming obsolete and the humanitarian element of the tag making a significant contribution to well being. Tell me a little bit more about the roots of this vision that you have, the Catholic elements, the Conservative elements. I know who I'm hearing echoes of in what you're saying but I'd like you to tell me about it.

Yes, I do have a Christian conviction. I actually happen to be old Church of England, but I think it is kind of the other way round, my Christian conviction and my views on this come from the same source, as it were. I find that my own assessment of the human presence on earth has been open to an enormous number of influences and fairly wide reading and I think a kind of central Christian view is peculiarly sound and brilliant, but I don't actually think that Christianity necessarily foresees, or presumes, the evolutionary advancement of man towards the great role of the spirit in him. I think Christianity sees man as individually redeemable in all cases without exception. My own sense is that the capacity and responsibility of man to handle the totality of his presence on earth is increasing, and this will inescapably raise the degree of participation of the spiritual factor. I think we do actually see it already in our society in all sorts of ways,

See TOM STACEY, next page

TOM STACEY, from page 25

sometimes in rather mumbly and fumbly ways but those will become increasingly refined in our lifetime—and mine is longer than yours. We've seen an extraordinary growth of awareness. Any intelligent child of twelve years old is immensely aware of matters like global warming and ecology and of our responsibility towards the preservation of endangered species, all sorts of things which show veneration for our gift of life and which then push a person towards meditative prayer and reflection on the whole. These are increasingly live issues. Man will only survive if his optimism survives. Optimism will only be possible by the increased activity of the spirit in people's construction. Whether it carries a specific religious label or not is perhaps neither here nor there, but the great religions are in their essence pretty good. The eternal truths have been well voiced for many centuries or even millennia. So, this is something which does bear upon my whole thinking on the immediate situation.

MN: I know you have a brother who would share at least some of what you just said. Am I right in thinking that there are family and educational roots to the origins of these beliefs?

My brother is an ordained priest of the Church of England. Yes, I think we grew up, like you did, in a thinking household where we presumed that service to the broad community was an automatic function for ourselves. But I cut my own path through this particular route and my dear brother and I don't share views on probably the majority of issues.

I love George Orwell's marvelous clarity, a fellow Old Etonian I may say. He appeals to me because he was a man who thought for himself and while I don't want to characterize myself as his equivalent, that is the way you should be. (Therefore in answer to your previous question, I don't think I am a result of my conditioning.) This morning, I was reading Bonhoeffer. He says you have to dare to find peace, both inwardly and outwardly, you've got to be in a constant state of personal exploration and have absolutely no darkneses. And you must integrate the totality of your human nature—on which I have an anciently traditional view. I do see man in the first place as soul, as probably Plato and the great Mediaeval thinkers viewed him. It is not that we have a soul but that we *are* soul. I start from that premise. I see a clear distinction between being and existence. We have got into a great confusion of seeing our self as something from which another self stands outside of. I think that community should be as protean as it needs to be, but the 'us-ness' is not only an essential thing for coherent behavior, informing people as they grow up of the structure of their attitudes—which then determines the way they behave—but is also a holy thing in that it is a factor which leads to the release of self into an implicitly limitless whole.

MN. Thank you very much, it has been a great pleasure to talk to you, and a great privilege.

Stacey, Tom (1953). *The Hostile Sun: A Malayan Journey*. London: Duckworth.

Stacey, Tom (1991). *Decline*. London: Heinemann.

Nellis, Mike (1991). The Electronic Monitoring of Offenders in England and Wales: recent developments and future prospects. *British Journal of Criminology* 31(2) 162-85.

Notes

- 1 Founded in 1866, the London-based Howard League for Penal Reform is the oldest prison reform organization in the world.
- 2 The Prison Reform Trust was founded in 1981 as an alternative to the Howard League.
- 3 NACRO, formerly the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, is a British non-profit devoted to assisting offenders with re-entry.
- 4 *Interviewer's Note:* Harry Fletcher remains a major figure in the National Association of Probation Officers. He was not, in my view, a Luddite in the sense suggested here and his undoubtedly hostile stance towards electronic monitoring in the early years has to be understood in the context of vastly unfair and destructive criticisms that the Home Office was then making of the English probation service (see Nellis 1991). He has been, and remains, a major public champion of good practice in probation and is rightly revered by many in the probation service. He was right that electronic monitoring would initially cause net-widening – its use on offenders who might not otherwise have deserved such an onerous penalty – but like many in the Probation Service, his views on EM softened over the years, without him ever becoming enthusiastic.—*M. Nellis*
- 5 *Editor's Note:* *Lex talionis*: punishment appropriate to the offense. Essentially synonymous with "eye for an eye."
- 6 *Interviewer's Note:* What Stacey called "tracking tagging" is now what we refer to as continuous location monitoring, and has become the new standard for electronic monitoring with the development of Global Positioning System tracking, or GPS. GPS Satellite tracking of offenders was finally piloted in three sites in England and Wales between 2004 and 2006, on juvenile offenders, domestic violence offenders, sex offenders and "persistent and prolific offenders" (mostly drug-using burglars). Following an evaluation which questioned its cost-effectiveness, the government decided not to pursue it, and spent money on expanding the prison system instead, but recently a National Health Service Trust in London has show interest in satellite tracking offenders with mental disorders who are temporarily in their secure care. ■